DYING LIGHT

NIGHTMARE ROW

RAYMOND BENSON

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By

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PROLOGUE

D-Day—The Final Saturday of the Harran Global Athletic Games Disaster

Dr. Khalim Abbas stood on the sidewalk and stared at the school on the other side of Darwish Road. He'd heard the bizarre humming—or *chanting?*—coming from inside the building as he approached. He hadn't known what to expect when he decided to investigate the strange rumors about the school. It had been an afterthought after visiting the postal office that morning to mail the package of blood samples to America.

Should he go inside? The truth was that he was frightened. Every nerve in his body told him it was dangerous. It was possible the source of the mysterious epidemic that had struck Harran was hidden just through those doors.

You're a doctor! he told himself. *The Harran Commissioner of Health! What's wrong with you?*

It was his duty to find out what was going on in there.

As if on cue, the double doors opened and a man stepped outside into the sun. Not a student. Was he a teacher? Abbas didn't think so. The man was dressed in a caftan, and although there was at least fifty feet between them, Abbas could have sworn there was smeared, dried blood on the man's garment.

He didn't belong in that school!

Abbas quickly ducked behind a lamp post and watched as the man sluggishly descended the stone steps. He acted as if he was drunk or stoned or... *something*. In a trance of some kind. When the man reached the pavement, he wandered toward City Square.

Abbas wondered if he should call Kerim. The police chief would know what to do. The problem was that Abbas hadn't heard from his friend in over a week. There was a crisis occurring in Harran, and the idiotic President and his team were ignoring it. And just a couple of miles away, hundreds of unsuspecting visitors from around the world were in the stadium watching the blasted Games.

In three short weeks, hell had come to Harran, and Dr. Abbas was perhaps the only individual in the city-state who knew it.

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Three Weeks Before the Harran Global Athletic Games Disaster

So it was to be another one of those *days, was it?*

Dr. Abbas almost muttered the rhetorical question aloud when the head nurse told him four more patients had walked in the front door. He glanced at the clock on the wall and immediately knew he wouldn't be home in time for dinner.

"We'll see them all," he told her. "At six o'clock, lock the door, but we'll see everyone that's already waiting."

"Yes, doctor," Nurse Sumru nodded, and then hurried to inform the rest of the staff at the free clinic. Abbas sighed and quickly jotted down his notes in the previous patient's folder. If only the president would spend a day of his week in the Slums, he thought, then the man might understand what life was really like in the city-state of Harran. President Hamid was in denial that there were disparate levels of human comfort in the metropolis. While "New Town," a small section of Harran, had been modernized for tourists and attracted worldwide attention with its new sports stadium, much of the residential areas consisted of a low to middle-class

population. Where there was poverty, there was disease. As Commissioner of Health in Harran, Abbas felt it was his civic duty to spend one day of his week at the free clinic in the Slums, "getting his hands dirty," as he liked to put it. The rest of his time was spent in an administrative capacity at Harran's City Hall in New Town.

So far that day, Abbas had seen twelve adults and eighteen children, their appointments crammed together in an assembly line. Which, in a way, was what the free clinic was. Today there had been two cases of flu symptoms, a broken ankle, eight pregnant mothers, two siblings with chicken pox, a serious heart condition in an elderly patient, a child who had stepped on a nail, a variety of respiratory infections, someone who wanted to quit smoking, and two cases in which the patients were obviously mentally ill. The clinic had a full time staff of two physicians, five nurses, and one bookkeeper/receptionist. They were overworked, overwhelmed, and underpaid. Volunteering his time to help on Tuesdays was the least Abbas could do. Unfortunately, he wasn't getting any younger. He was bald, had a salt-and-pepper beard, a bit of a paunch, and was fifty-three-years old. He grew tired much more easily than before. Thank goodness he didn't have to keep up a practice.

It was close to quitting time for the day, but of course the clinic would see the patients still sitting in the waiting room. Abbas took a moment to call his wife and tell her that he would be later than he thought.

"That's all right," she told him. "It took me a while to get home because of the construction. The roads were terrible. The city is going all out on these Games."

"Yes, they're trying to get everything ready in time. Meanwhile the public just gets sick," Abbas replied.

Nurse Sumru showed her face once more and gently nudged him with, "Number Three is

still waiting, doctor."

"I have to go," Abbas said into his cell phone. "I'll ring you when I'm leaving. Bye." He turned to the nurse. "I'm coming. Remind me again—"

"Mrs. Baydar is here with her son, eleven years old."

"Oh, right. Flu?"

"Something like that. Can't keep anything down. He's vomited twice since he's been here."

Abbas sighed as he opened the door to the examination room. A young woman, her head covered by a traditional Arabic hijab, stood next to the table where her son, Jorin, lay in a fetal position. She held a clean plastic bag that the nurse had given her in case her boy was sick again.

Abbas spoke Arabic to the woman. Everyone in Harran spoke Arabic, although a large portion of the population spoke Turkish, and a respectable minority used Armenian or Georgian. Younger people and the more affluent also knew English, as did Abbas. "What seems to be the problem, Mrs. Baydar?"

"Doctor, my son is so sick. When he got home from school today he started feeling bad."

The boy moaned and winced as the doctor leaned over the table to look at him. "Hello, Jorin. It's Jorin, right?"

The boy nodded, but he conveyed the fact that he was truly miserable with a groan that turned into tears.

"There, there," Abbas said, "we'll have you feeling better in no time." He nodded at the anxious mother and took a look at the boy's vitals that were taken by the nurse. Fever of 104˚. Not good. Jorin was a small, puny boy who looked much younger than eleven. That high of a fever was very dangerous for someone his size.

"You say it came on him suddenly?"

"He was fine as he came in the door, but within a half hour he started feeling sick."

"When did he last eat and what was it?"

"Food I sent with him to school. He ate it just a few hours earlier. But, look, he showed me *this*." She reached over and pulled up Jorin's right pants leg. The skin had been broken on the calf with what appeared to be teeth marks.

"What happened here? Did a dog bite him?"

"No, he says it was a man."

"A *man*?"

"A beggar in the Slums square. Jorin has to pass through it on his way to and from school. He said the man was behaving strangely, shouting at people, crawling on his hands and knees and chasing after them, *like* a dog."

Abbas took a closer look at the wound. The skin around the punctures was swollen and redder than what a bite might normally produce.

"I washed it thoroughly," Mrs. Baydar said.

"Is he allergic to anything?" Abbas asked.

"No."

Abbas rubbed his hand on his smooth, shiny head. It was indeed unusual. He continued to examine the bite and asked, "Did the police get involved?"

"No, after he was bitten, Jorin just came home. The man ran off, apparently yelling obscenities."

Could it be possible that the beggar had a contagious disease? Rabies, perhaps? Was this what he was seeing? If it wasn't food poisoning, at the very least the boy had a gastrointestinal

virus, and that was how the doctor decided he would treat the patient. Nevertheless, Abbas would have a word with the Chief of Police. With the eyes of the world on Harran for the upcoming Athletic Games, it wouldn't do to have tourists being bitten by Harran citizens.

"I'm going to order a blood test, Mrs. Baydar. I'm pretty sure he just got hit with a stomach virus, and a nasty one at that. I'll give you a balm to put on the bite that should reduce the swelling and prevent infection. I'll also give you something to ease the nausea. He should have a spoonful of that three times a day. In the meantime, have him drink *plenty* of water, and I want him to take children's ibuprofen according to the instructions on the bottle for the next three days."

The woman seemed a little disappointed that the doctor wasn't able to wave a magic wand and automatically cure her son. "Thank you, doctor."

"Keep an eye on his fever. If it doesn't start going down by tomorrow, bring him back to the clinic. The nurse will take you down the hall to the lab to draw blood."

Mrs. Baydar nodded and then spoke softly to her son. As Abbas turned away to leave the room and give the prescription instructions to the nurse, Jorin viciously slapped away his mother's hand as she attempted to get him to sit up. The boy emitted a shrieking cry that sounded like a wounded animal fighting for its life.

"Jorin!" his mother said.

Abbas stared at the boy, went back to him, and said, "Jorin, I promise if you go home with your mother and rest, take your medicine, and drink lots of water, you'll feel better."

Jorin reluctantly got off the table and moaned his displeasure at having to move.

"Thank you, doctor," the mother said again as they went out the door.

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Three days passed before Dr. Abbas could speak to his friend, the Chief of Police. Abbas had known Kerim Demir since they were both children, for they had grown up on the same street in Old Town Harran. There was a time, when they were young, when Khalim and Kerim were two heads of the same person. Best of friends, always together. Much later, when as adults both of them received important civic and governmental jobs, they made it a point to get together at least once a month. They met, as usual, at a favorite long-standing Turkish restaurant near City Hall. Nothing like a helping of savory *Akçaabat köftesi*—meatballs with tomato, hot peppers, green beans, and bread—to soothe the stress. Harran cuisine was a pleasant mixture of Turkish and Armenian dishes, and both Abbas and Demir considered that "their" restaurant served the best comfort food in the city-state.

Abbas immediately noticed that his friend seemed worried and agitated. He was a big bear of a man—a bulldog with a dark, bushy mustache and eyebrows. His old friend had a temper, too, and if things got too out of hand, there could be fireworks—and not just in the sky.

"I hope I die before those damned *Games* start," Demir said as they sat at a table with their meals. "What are you talking about?" Abbas asked with a smile.

"Please have me shot before I have to bear another day of this. I can't tell you how busy we've been, what with everything that has to be done before those blasted Games, and *of course* that's when the crazies decide to come out of the woodwork. I'm nervous about it, Khalim. Our force just isn't big enough to handle the kinds of crowds we're going to see."

"Wait, wait. What crazies?"

"You haven't heard about the two—no, *three*—cases this past week of people going berserk?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

Demir stuffed a piece of tomato in his mouth and said, “Hmpf, I would have thought you’d have been alerted. It’s a mental health issue, I suspect.”

“That’s very curious, Kerim, because I was going to ask you about a patient I had at the free clinic on Tuesday. A boy, age eleven, I think. He’d been bitten on the leg by a man in the Slums; the boy described him as a beggar who was acting like a dog. Does that mean anything to you?”

Demir frowned. “That sounds a lot like the three incidents we had this week. Two were in the Slums, one in Old Town. A man of forty-two, married, with two teenage children, went nuts and killed his family and himself with a kitchen knife! Neighbors heard him yelling and carrying on for a while prior to the screams. As if he was mighty angry about something. When they were all on the autopsy table, Ali found bite marks on the wife and kids.”

Abbas knew that Ali was the medical examiner.

“The guy had bitten them, his wife and children, and it didn’t happen postmortem.”

“I heard about the crime, but I didn’t know those details. The media made it out to be a domestic tragedy. What did Ali find in the blood?”

“Nothing. No drugs, anyway.”

The doctor remembered another news item he’d recently seen. “Was another case the woman at the market?”

“Yes. A twenty-three year-old mother was at the market with her infant in a stroller. At first she fainted. People stepped up to help her, and an ambulance and police were called. But she suddenly went ballistic, shouting and screaming at those around her. She grabbed the carriage and ran off. Some of the bystanders were afraid she’d harm the baby.”

“What happened?”

"Witnesses had recognized the woman from the neighborhood and told the responding officers who she was. They went to her house and neither she nor the child was there, and she hasn't come home since. The husband has filed a missing persons report. That was two days ago."

"Oh, yes, right," Abbas said. "I remember reading about the missing mother and child, but I didn't know about the incident at the market. There's another missing person, isn't there?"

"In the Slums again, a teenage kid terrorized a bunch of younger boys on the street. One poor kid was beaten pretty badly. The others successfully pulled the instigator off the victim, and the bastard ran away, shouting like a maniac. He's missing now, too. The common denominator in all these is that the agitator appears to become very angry and uncontrollable before committing an act of violence."

Abbas was appalled. "That I didn't know. I should have been informed about all this. Do you think my beggar is related to this?"

"Could be. Are you sure he was a beggar?"

"Well, *someone* bit that boy. I was afraid he'd contracted rabies or something, so I ordered some tests. I should have the results after the weekend. I haven't heard from his mother, so I presume he's doing better."

"Well, that's interesting. In the market case, the woman with the baby—her husband told us she'd been feeling poorly earlier that day. Stomach ache, headache, muscle aches. She had to lie down for a while before going out to the market."

Abbas stroked his beard. "Did she throw up at all?"

"I don't know."

Abbas proceeded to finish his meal. "Keep me informed if you have any more incidents

like the ones you described, would you? I'll have to speak to my team about this."

After they were done, Abbas walked to his office in the City Hall building, which sat in the middle of a rectangular park. Major avenues stemmed from each corner of the park. Only a mile away down one of those stems stood Harran's modern stadium, which was undergoing a rushed and ambitious decoration in order to be ready for the start of the Games in a little over two weeks. In recent years modern buildings, including a handful of classy hotels, had sprung up around the stadium and replaced ancient ones that had endured for nearly a century. New Town was much more Western in feel than the rest of the city, but Abbas didn't mind that. Harran as a whole was not only historically fascinating, but it had also become a cosmopolitan center of tourism due to its proximity to Turkey and Armenia. The old and the new—it was a good thing. And today, everywhere Abbas looked he found evidence that something *big* was about to happen in Harran. Banners hung over all of the streets of New Town and posters were plastered on building walls. Excitement was in the air.

The Games were coming.

Back in his rather plush office on the third floor, Abbas heard the call to *salat* and said his *Dhuhr* prayers. The place was a sanctuary for him, something he'd decorated in the fashion of an English library, with shelves of books, red leather furniture, a portable refrigerator, and a private bath and shower. The desk was solid oak. It made Abbas feel as if he was much more important than he really was. When he was done with the daily ritual, Abbas sat at his desk and composed a memo to his staff of two people, admonishing them for not investigating and submitting a report on the strange acts he'd been told about. Then he entered his thoughts in a personal journal that he kept on top of the desk.

He had already written about the bitten child two days earlier. Now he added to the

journal what Demir had told him, and wrote that he, too, had a bad feeling about the upcoming event. When Abbas was finished, he turned to his computer to continue working on a letter he was sending to his good friend and colleague in America, Dr. Christina Marlow. The two of them had attended medical school in New York together and became close. Their uncommon backgrounds eventually led them apart; he returned to his native home with his degree, but they kept in touch and often solicited medical advice on problem cases. Since Dr. Marlow couldn't read Arabic, Abbas wrote in English. He also had his reasons for not using e-mail and instead sending a typed letter the old-fashioned way.

He told her about the child and the other bizarre cases that Kerim had mentioned, and expressed his concern that something odd was going on in Harran. Abbas then put the file away with the intention of adding to it as the week went on, after he knew more about Jorin Baydar's case.

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Two Weeks Before the Harran Athletic Games Disaster

On Monday, the media was bursting with a story of violence that occurred Sunday night, uncomfortably close to New Town. Police shot and killed a man who was "making threatening advances" to people on the street, and, when confronted, he attacked the police with what appeared to be a weapon in his hand. It was the kind of incident that rarely happened in Harran, if at all.

Dr. Abbas didn't like the other implications of the story either. He hoped Chief Demir would be at the weekly Games Planning Meeting, which would take up most of the morning. Abbas wanted to discuss the situation with Demir before saying anything to the others, but

unfortunately the chief wasn't there.

The meeting was attended by eight men. President Hamid announced Chief Demir's excuse, saying that the police were very busy. He also cited the incident in the news as a reason for Demir's absence, but otherwise the president didn't invite discussion about what had happened. Instead, the man held court and controlled the agenda—to go over every single aspect of the Games with regards to tourism. His biggest concern was presenting a positive picture of Harran to the rest of the world. Abbas agreed that the Games would bring massive publicity to a city unaccustomed to such. They would provide much needed income. The Games were also a terrific temporary employment opportunity for Harran citizens. Peace In Our Time, PIOT—the international youth adult organization sponsoring the event—needed people to do the grunt work behind the scenes, the actual running of the Games. And then there was the desire to sell concessions, and make and sell official souvenirs. They wanted folks to be liaisons to the press. In short, PIOT was paying to have Harran bend over backwards to accommodate whatever the company wanted. And, granted, all of that was very good for the city-state. Even the top brass of the Ministry of Defense concurred.

But Abbas also felt it was his duty to give everyone a "head's-up" regarding the possible medical situation. When it came his turn to speak, he cleared his throat and said, "Mr. President, gentlemen, I thought we should address what happened last night not far from here."

Hamid interrupted Abbas and said, "It was most unfortunate. The man was a lunatic. I have no doubt our officers did the right thing. It was tragic, but it was a clean shooting. Let's not waste time discussing it."

"I'm not questioning the role the police played, sir. I'm more concerned about the man and why he was behaving the way he was. This past week, I've heard of other incidents in

which people have behaved erratically and aggressively, and it led to violence. As you know, we've had some deaths in Harran. Murders. Missing persons."

"I'm aware of that, Dr. Abbas," the president said. "What's your point?"

"I'm just throwing it out there; perhaps we should know exactly what we're dealing with here before we have a million people, or however many it is, come and visit."

The president winced and barked, "Are you out of your mind? We're not going to even *think* about cancelling or postponing the Games. All for two or three people who were off their medication? *That* would be insane!"

"But, respectfully, sir, what if we're dealing with, well, a disease? A virus of some kind. It could spread. Infect a lot of people."

The president glared at the doctor and was silent a moment. Then, he calmly said, "Well then, Dr. Abbas, I'd say that's *your* job, isn't it? Find out what we're dealing with here. And be discreet about it. But I want to be perfectly clear." He addressed the entire room. "I don't care if we have an earthquake or a flood or a war. The Games are happening, and we're too close to them now to change course. It's for the good of Harran. Now let's move on."

That afternoon, Abbas tried to contact Demir, but couldn't reach him. The doctor sat at his expansive desk and examined the contents of an envelope that Ali had sent over. It was the blood work report of the man who had killed himself and his family. The report highlighted the unusually high level of adrenaline, but everything else was normal. Abbas had asked Ali to run the tests again, this time focusing on the presence of viruses and antibodies, but he wouldn't know the results for a few days. What was striking about the man's blood chemistry, though, was that it was remarkably similar to that of young Jorin Baydar, whose tests came back that day as well. Even though Jorin had been lying motionless on the table, he'd had adrenaline surging

through his body.

Abbas wrote all of this in his journal. It was always best to document *everything*.

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Another Tuesday, another day at the free clinic.

Again, the staff was engulfed by a tidal wave of patients. Most of it was the usual sort of complaints, but four separate people came in with the same flu-like symptoms that Jorin Baydar had presented. One patient admitted that a brother had bit her arm the previous night and run off into the street after he'd done it. The wound was red and swollen. Dr. Abbas prescribed the identical medications and treatment that he had done for the Baydar boy.

It was mid-afternoon when Abbas stopped a moment in the physicians' shared office to catch his breath. He'd been working nonstop since eight that morning, only pausing to eat a bite of lunch between patients. He needed just ten minutes to chill out before tackling the rest of the day's dose of pain and suffering. Oh, how he could do with some fresh, blended Turkish coffee! But the best Abbas could do was sit at a desk with a cup of some generic coffee that was brewed in an inadequate machine hours earlier. Should he attempt to run out to the corner coffeehouse? No, he wouldn't have the proper time to enjoy it.

Abbas was, however, contemplating doing just that when he heard screaming in the waiting room. It was a high-pitched, ear-shattering assault on the senses that, even back in the office, was so loud it hurt. Abbas immediately jumped up and ran to see what the fuss was about. On his way he heard Nurse Sumru cry, "Doctor! Help!"

He found two adult men, the head nurse, and the boy's mother attempting to hold Jorin Baydar in a chair. The screeching—if that's what it could be called—was coming from his mouth. Abbas was more shocked by the boy's appearance than by the horrid sound.

For one thing, the kid looked terribly malnourished, and the color of his skin was extremely pale except for several purplish blotches, typical of porphyria, or the acquiring of enzymes that caused neurological and dermatological damage. Secondly, Jorin was experiencing limb paresis—he had lost voluntary control of his muscles. But instead of having limp appendages, Jorin's arms and legs were straight as boards. The boy's eyes were bloodshot and full of terror, and it was obvious that fear was the catalyst of the screaming. It was as if he thought everyone and everything around him were threats. Hallucinations?

"Get him in one of the rooms, quick!" Abbas shouted. He turned to another nurse that had run in behind the doctor. "Get me a hypodermic with five milligrams of Droperidol and five milligrams of Midazolam, mixed evenly. Hurry!"

The other patients in the waiting room had got up from their seats and were pushing away from the cluster of staff that carried the boy to an examination room. Some had left the clinic in fright. "It's all right, everyone," Abbas said, holding his hands up. "The poor boy has a painful disease. It's not contagious. Have a seat and we'll get to you as soon as we can."

It's not contagious. How did he know that? Was that the first lie he would tell about the strange events occurring in Harran?

Abbas went to the room where they were holding the boy on the examining table. Mrs. Baydar had tears running down her face and was being comforted by one of the two men with her.

"How long has he been like this?" he asked her.

"Four days."

"*Four days?* You should have gone to the hospital!"

"We couldn't let him out of his room! We had to lock the door. He tore up the house.

He broke all his toys. He wouldn't let us near him! Jorin was full of... *rage*!"

"How in Allah's name did you get him here, then?"

"My husband and brother tackled him, tied him up, and brought him here. I knew you would be at the clinic today. I wanted *you* to see him."

The uncle spoke up. "He *bit* me when we were wrestling with him." He showed the doctor where Jorin's teeth had punctured the skin of his left hand.

"What's wrong with him?" the husband demanded. "*What's wrong with him*?"

"I'm going to find out, I promise," Abbas replied. The nurse came in with the hypo; Abbas took it and asked the other nurses to hold the patient while he injected the medication into Jorin's arm. "There, that should calm him down."

Sure enough, within seconds, the screaming stopped. The boy appeared to relax a little, but his eyes continued to dart around in fear. The overhead fluorescents seemed to bother him, for he repeatedly squeezed his eyelids shut and opened them.

Abbas turned back to the mother. "I need to hospitalize him."

"Oh, dear." She went to her son and held his head to her chest. Jorin struggled, not wanting to be touched. Abbas started to tell her to get away from him, when the angry husband asked, "So you don't *know* what's wrong with him, is that it?"

"Mr. Baydar, please let us do our—"

The woman's shriek interrupted him. "He bit me!" she cried, jumping back from the table and shaking her arm. Her son had drawn blood.

The screaming began once again, causing an already chaotic scene to become pure bedlam. Jorin bolted from the table, his jaws snapping at anyone who came within a few inches of him. He swung at the air, his nails bared to scratch skin. Despite the patient's paresis, which

apparently came and went, the boy aggressively fought his way out of the room. So much for the injection, which obviously hadn't worked.

"Stop him!" Abbas shouted, but no one wanted to try. The sound and fury of the frenzied boy with nightmarish skin coloring and an ear-bursting wail of pure terror was enough to make anyone's blood run cold. Only a hero or a fool would want to touch the... *creature.* Unimpeded, Jorin Baydar raced out of the clinic and into the street. Abbas took off after him, as did the boy's father and uncle. On the way out, Abbas managed to deliver an order to Nurse Sumru to call the police.

*

Later, after the day's work at the clinic, Dr. Abbas went to his office instead of going home. He was exhausted and, to put it mildly, not just a little frightened.

Jorin Baydar wasn't found. He had disappeared into the Slums, essentially a wild animal that was as dangerous to others as he was to himself. Police had searched the area until nightfall, but no one on the streets had any clues as to where the boy could have gone. Like the other missing persons in Harran, Jorin had simply vanished into the crooks and crannies of the ancient neighborhoods of the city. And there were many of those.

Abbas brought his journal and the letter to Dr. Marlow in the States up to date and then recited his *Maghrib* prayers. He had a lot to say in them. Afterwards, he poured himself a glass of raki. He dropped two ice cubes into it, turning the liquid to a golden white. Even though consuming alcoholic beverages was prohibited by Islam, everyone Abbas knew partook at meals and privately in the home. He needed the drink to settle his nerves, for what he had seen that day had shaken him to the core.

It was something unknown, a display of disturbing symptoms that he had never

encountered before. Whatever it was that afflicted that child needed to be studied and contained. Tomorrow he should go straight to the Ministry—but, no, he would instead go to Hamid and insist one more time that the Games be called off, rather than go over the President's head. He knew their leader would never agree, but Abbas owed it to Harran to make the attempt.

The memory of that boy's terrified face and the sound of his unearthly scream caused a shiver to go up Abbas' spine. He felt it tingling the back of his neck until he involuntarily shuddered. There was no question about it. He was afraid for the Games and all the people coming to Harran from around the world. And there was nothing he could do except pour another glass of raki.

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D-Day—The Final Saturday of the Harran Global Athletic Games Disaster

Now, as Dr. Abbas stood across from New Town High School and debated with himself whether or not he should enter the building, the humming and chanting grew louder.

Who is in there? What in blazes are they doing?

It had been a horrible week. The multitudes began to arrive ten days ago, on Wednesday. The Games began the following Tuesday night. It was now four days later, and the reports of missing persons and murders in the streets of Old Town and the Slums had multiplied to shocking statistics. New Town was seeing its fair share of violence, too, and it all seemed to orbit around the high school.

That morning, Abbas had gone to his office, finished his letter to Dr. Marlow, packed blood samples to send to her, and set off walking to the nearby post office. When he arrived, he realized the letter wasn't in his pocket. That made him angry and frustrated. Had he dropped it

on the way? It could be anywhere between the post office and City Hall. Abbas rarely cursed, but he did so to himself when he realized his foolishness. Nevertheless, he posted the package and made up his mind to return to his office and recreate the letter.

But he had taken a short side trip to Darwish Road to take a look at the high school, and here he was. Scared and hesitant. The sweat trickled down his neck. His heart rate had increased. Should he have a weapon? He didn't own one. Abbas wouldn't know how to use a gun if he did.

If you're going inside, you'd better get going, he commanded himself. *Be brave. It can't* possibly *be that bad, can it?*

He stepped into the street and crossed to the other side. It was then that he realized there wasn't much traffic. For a Saturday morning, that was unheard of.

Where was everyone? They weren't all at the Games.

Perhaps the Harranites were just as frightened as he was and were staying indoors. Good for them.

Abbas went up the stone steps and put his ear to the doors. The ugly chorale was a symphony of moans. It sounded as if the people inside were in pain and were collectively and wordlessly expressing their misery. A bunch of very sick civilians had gathered in the school—why, Abbas couldn't fathom.

Steeling his nerves and taking a deep breath, the doctor opened the doors. The stench that met his nostrils almost overpowered him. He gagged and put a hand over his mouth. Abbas considered turning back, but now his curiosity—first as a physician and second as a human being—got the best of him. He stepped inside.

The inner foyer was empty, but it was clear that the noise was coming from the

gymnasium, off to the left.

He had come this far...

Abbas slowly approached the double doors to the gym, swallowed, and opened them.

The horror inside was too much to comprehend. He screamed bloody murder and stumbled backwards. He needed to run for help but he was frozen in his tracks.

And then the source of the terror turned its attention to *him,* and darkness overtook the dying light in his eyes.

1

Two Weeks After the Harran Global Athletic Games Disaster

6:30am.

Mel Wyatt opened her eyes, winced at the brightness of the new day, and immediately vomited. She forced herself to get to her knees in order to keep the vile stuff from getting on her clothes, although lying in the recesses of a burnt-out building wasn't the cleanest place she could have hidden. Soot, ash, and blackened pieces of the wooden roof that had caved into the space littered the floor; its filthiness hadn't been so obvious last night when she'd slithered inside the structure.

You don't care too much where you're going when you're running for your life. The main thing is to hide—quickly and silently—so *they* don't get you.

After she'd finished heaving, Mel crawled away from the mess and weakly collapsed. She lay on her back, looking up through the gaping hole at the clouds in the bright blue sky. Unlike most of the buildings on Nightmare Row, this one was a single-storied shop of some kind—or it used to be. Ironically, it was a beautiful day outside. The weather was perfect—although hot—ideal for a relaxing swim in the hotel pool.

Yeah, right.

Hotel Harran was now a relic of the past. The newly-built luxury establishment was now burned, destroyed, and overrun with Infected. And it had happened so quickly. The siege by the creatures began after ten last evening, and it was over in less than an hour. Everyone who was still alive had fled into the dark, dangerous streets of Harran. Mel was surprised no one else had

followed her into the little blackened shop, where she huddled for hours in fear until she had finally fallen asleep.

Sleep. At this point, it was something that wasted precious time. And she didn't have a whole lot of that left.

Mel rolled up the torn sleeve of the windbreaker she had donned to keep warm, for the nights could get surprisingly cold for such an arid climate. The bite on her forearm was angry, red, and swollen. It burned like the dickens. She noted the time on her wristwatch; it had been roughly seven-and-a-half hours since the Infected's teeth had clamped down and punctured her skin. Now, the wound appeared diseased and putrid. Yellow pus oozed from the several perforations. It was gross, it hurt, and it was certainly deadly. She quickly covered it with the sleeve of her jacket, although it, too, exhibited punctures in the fabric.

She stifled a cry, but the tears flowed regardless.

How long did she have? There was no question that she would turn. It happened to everyone who was bitten. Sometimes it took a few hours, but she had seen others fight it for up to two days. Paul had wisely conjectured that it depended on how healthy a person was. If you were young, strong, and in good shape, then you lasted longer. The weak, elderly, and very young—children—turned quickly. And it was horrible. She had seen first-hand what transpired when a person turned. Mel did *not* want that to happen to her.

The nausea had passed, but Mel felt as if she had the flu. She placed a palm to her forehead and realized she was burning up. How high was her fever? No way to know.

Again—how long did *she* have? After all, she was an eighteen-year-old athlete who had youth and vigor on her side. She rarely became ill back home in the States when she was growing up, unlike Paul, who had always been a sickly child. If she did happen to catch

something, her body's natural defenses fought off the germs and viruses with alacrity. Her mother had always marveled at how "in the pink" Mel could be, compared to other kids her age.

So would this help her? Could her healthy resistance keep herself from turning before the medicine arrived?

If the medicine arrived.

But first... Mel was thirsty and hungry. She felt better now and thought that eating would help even more. The dizziness subsided, so she tried to stand. She did so with no problem and was steady on her feet. Her backpack lay on the floor, so she stooped to look inside and take stock of her supplies. A pair of sunglasses, some sunscreen lotion, a cheap umbrella, her passport, and a sweater. There wasn't much in the way of breakfast—just a granola bar that she greedily consumed in a few seconds. She would need to find water and more food soon. It was already warm out; later the mid-day the sun would be swelteringly hot. She definitely wouldn't need the windbreaker, but she decided it was best to wear it anyway to hide the bite on her arm. If she encountered any other survivors, she wouldn't want them to know about it. Beneath the jacket, she wore a T-shirt. The rest of her clothing consisted of the pair of jeans she had on, and the tennis shoes on her feet.

Mel stood again and breathed deeply. Yes. She felt good enough to move about. The thing was—what was she going to do? She couldn't just stay where she was.

It was hard to believe that three-and-a-half weeks earlier she and her family had arrived in Harran for the Global Athletic Games. She was full of excitement and wonder; she had never traveled outside the U.S., and the trip to the city-state of Harran was like an exotic dream come true. Her parents had been so proud that she was one of the competitors. Her brother Paul worshipped his older sister. She was his protector and heroine.

Now her parents were dead and she knew nothing about her brother. Was Paul still alive? Could it even be possible? Sadly, it was doubtful. Her younger sibling had disappeared last night, lost in the chaos at the hotel. As she evacuated the burning building with dozens of other survivors, Mel thought she'd caught a glimpse of Paul's orange University of Texas Longhorns T-shirt in the mass of moving bodies. He was wearing it yesterday and still had it on shortly before the Infected breached the hotel. She also could have sworn she'd heard his voice—screaming and crying—in the middle of the stampeding throng. They'd taken him. The Infected had him. At the very least, he was bitten, like her, and then he'd become one of them. At the worst, he was dead. It was also possible that the Infected had simply fed on him and left his small, broken body on the street somewhere. Even though the hotel was only a block away, it was no use going back to look for him. No one would be there. It was now a very dangerous spot, probably surrounded by Infected. Paul could be anywhere. There was nothing she could do but come to grips with the likelihood that her brother was gone for good. The poor boy. Only twelve-years-old. Paul had been born with mild autism, which contributed to his fragility. He had been so frightened and traumatized over the past two weeks, while they were stuck in that hotel like a prisoner with the rest of the survivors. The fourteen days had been hell on earth, but it certainly wasn't as bad as what had been going on in the streets. Out there it was... Armageddon.

The sunlight streaming through the hole in the roof reminded Mel of how unsafe she was. The door to the burned-out building was off its hinges. Infected could wander in at any time. She had to get out of there and find a more secure hiding place. Infected somehow smelled uninfected people. Mel wondered if, now that she had been bitten, they would leave her alone. It wasn't clear how they operated. There was so much she didn't know about the Infected—no

one did, really—but there were lots of rumors and much speculation. Everyone believed it was some kind of virus. Some thought it was God's judgment, the coming of the Last Days. Everyone in the hotel had an opinion.

At least she had a weapon. It wasn't much, but the baseball bat was the best she could do, although there was a handgun in her backpack. She'd found it in the hotel. The problem with the revolver was that it contained only two rounds. Two measly bullets. That wouldn't do much damage.

Then there was the mystery of the so-called medicine. The hotel survivors had heard that the GRE was supposedly sending medicine to combat the disease. According to the report she'd heard, the drops would be sometime that very day, or at the latest, tomorrow. Mobil phone service ceased pretty quickly after the stadium disaster, but Emil got the news on his laptop. Astonishingly, Harran hadn't lost power. There were to be several drop spots around the city. Someone determined that the closest one to the hotel was the area known as City Square. That was a park located at least a couple of miles down the road, the major boulevard right in front of the hotel that also led to the stadium. City Square was just a little farther. The survivors in the hotel had renamed the boulevard "Nightmare Row" because it was a thoroughfare for Infected. It was truly a home for nightmares, for the violence and horror that took place on the street was so far beyond Mel's experience that she often thought, *If only I could wake myself up!* But on those days before the *parkour* race, she had enjoyed walking on the avenue from the hotel to the old structure that was one of Harran's landmarks. Surely she could make her way to City Square. In the daylight, the Infected were slower. More stupid. It didn't make them any less dangerous, but Mel could outrun them. It's what had saved her last night when others from the hotel fell victim to the horde. Of course, running down Nightmare Row would attract attention.

Even running wouldn't protect her from a mob that surrounded and overpowered her. She would instead have to move stealthily and quietly.

This thought conjured up a memory from the second night in the hotel after the Infected had attacked the Games.

*

"What is it about the night that changes them?" Mel asked Emil, the leader of the newly-formed Guard.

"Hell if I know," he said in his heavy Austrian accent.

Several of the Guard watched the Infected from the safety of the hotel lobby. The sun had set and the creatures in the street moved much more rapidly than they did during daylight. They didn't seem so dangerous when the sun was shining because the beasts moved slowly and unthinkingly. Now, however, they appeared to have much more energy and aggressiveness.

"Look," Jaroslav pointed. "Two of them are fighting."

Sure enough, one of the Infected that had an appearance of having been around longer than the others suddenly jumped on another man and started biting him ferociously. The victim fought back roughly until both men were wrestling on the ground like wild dogs. The Guard watched in fascination and revulsion as the Infected practically tore each other apart.

"That's... horrible," Mel said, averting her eyes.

"You're going to see a lot worse than that before we get out of here, Melanie," Jakub said, "so you might as well watch and get used to it. Especially if you want to join the Guard."

Then, without warning, one of the men outside ran toward the plate glass windows with the speed of a car. Everyone—including the boys—screamed as the Infected *smashed* through the glass, showering the lobby with shards.

"Quick!" Emil shouted. "Stop him!"

Armed with bats and clubs, the men in the hotel attacked the intruder. Mel couldn't watch. She backed away and crouched near the reception desk as the Guard beat the Infected to death. More Infected attempted to breach the shattered glass, but several survivors were already pushing furniture toward the hole to form a barricade.

It took all night and into the morning, but the Guard succeeded in turning back the onslaught and blocking the front of the hotel with more furniture and heavy machinery brought up from the basement.

But there was no question that the Infected became superhuman at night.

*

So was that the plan, then? Go to City Square and await the mythical medicine?

What the hell else am I going to do? she thought. *I have to do* something. *I can't just sit here and wait until I turn into one of* them.

Then the doubts came. Could she hold out another day without turning? Perhaps she should just end it all now. Spare herself the agony of losing her mind and soul. Take the handgun, put it to her temple, and fire one of those two paltry bullets. Or should she wait and risk turning? But then, would she no longer have the mental capacity to end her life? It seemed that Infected, in the early stages after turning, still had some semblance of their former personalities. That didn't necessarily mean they could think rationally.

She knew there was no point in trying to tell herself that she wasn't afraid, because she sure as hell *was*. She might be athletic and in shape, but that didn't mean she could handle the task she had set for herself. She definitely felt the tension in the air—an iron claw of death and destruction had gripped the city. She could practically taste it. To top it off, Harran was a

foreign country. Here she was in a place where the primary language was Arabic and the citizens were Islamic. It was daunting enough to be alone is such a world away from home without the added threat of the Infected.

Mel dug into the backpack again and pulled out the handgun. It was a Colt. She appreciated the weight in her palm, and then she lifted it to her head. She placed the end of the barrel to her temple and wrapped her finger around the trigger. It would be so simple. Just squeeze. Perhaps a moment of pain and surprise, and then blackness. She would never have to experience the horror of turning into one of them. It was truly the sensible thing to do. Who was she kidding? She was doomed. Nothing was going to stop her from turning, unless... unless...

The frikkin' medicine.

Was it true? *Was* the GRE really sending an antidote? Could she be saved?

As she was growing up, Mel often played cards with her father. He taught her how to play Blackjack, Poker, and even Baccarat. "Everything in life is a gamble, Melanie," he would say. "The trick is to consider the odds and determine if they're in your favor. But no matter what, you have to add that magic ingredient—luck. With a little luck, it's possible you can beat the odds. You never know."

Mel lowered the gun.

Her father's voice—the one in her head—told her to hold on. Wait. Maybe she *could* get the medicine. She had to try. What did she have to lose? Her life was already on tenterhooks. If she did nothing, she would eventually turn and become an Infected. No question about it. Or, she could do something and risk dying at the hands of Infected in order to get to the medicine that may or may not exist.

It was a no-brainer, really. Better to act, although neither prospect was very appealing.

She didn't want to be torn apart and devoured alive, and she didn't want to *become* one of them.

You never know.

"Fine then," she said aloud. "I'll make a promise." She would try to get the medicine at City Square, but if she felt the slightest loss of mental control, she would shoot herself.

Mel didn't know how long it was, but she might as well make the best of what time she had left. She would go on the journey down Nightmare Row. And, hey, if she happened to find her brother—great. If she had to, she would use one bullet on him, and the other one on herself.

Decision made.

Mel returned the gun to the pack and heaved it onto her back. It wasn't heavy, for it held practically nothing. She took another deep breath, prepared herself, and—

There was a crash at the front of the building, near the door. Then the scraping of shoes on the debris. A low growl. Loud sniffs.

Infected?

Shit, she thought. Mel immediately picked up the baseball bat and flattened her back to a wall that was in shadow. Did they smell her inside the place? Were they just curious, hunting for prey? There was no way to know.

The sound of the sluggish footsteps grew louder and closer. She could tell by the way they were moving that the intruders were indeed Infected. They trudged along slowly, one step at a time. Daylight speed. At night, things were very different.

Sure enough, two Infected appeared in the room where Mel stood as still as a statue. A man and a woman; in fact, she recognized them. A husband and wife. They had been at Hotel Harran, survivors during the siege of the city. Their daughter had been in the Games. She had gone missing after the disaster at the parkour race. Bob and Mary. From North Carolina. They

had been very distraught for those two tense weeks and stayed in their room most of the time. Apparently they had been bitten last night during the siege and had already turned. They looked horrible. Their clothes were torn and dirty, and Mary had blood on hers. Their pallor was pale and their eyes glazed and vacant. The irises were already turning yellow. They would be the color of gold before long.

Bob garbled something to Mary. It came out—"*Growl, snarl, hungry, growl.*" One English word in the midst of unintelligible animal noises. *Strange,* Mel thought. Perhaps in the early stages of becoming an Infected, one still had a partial grasp of language and a sense of being.

So far they hadn't seen her. Was the fact that she was bitten immunize her?

The woman sniffed loudly and croaked something. Bob apparently understood and started turning around. He sniffed, too, and snarled.

Christ, they do *smell me,* Mel thought. She clutched the bat, ready to strike if she had to. Of course, she had two bullets in the gun, but she wanted to save those—ironically, for her brother and herself. Up until the previous night, Mel hadn't been forced to kill any of the Infected. She never wanted to. As a member of the Guard at the hotel, she had been in a couple of scuffles with the "creatures," as Jakub called them. She'd swung her bat at them, hit them, and ran. Mel was hesitant to kill any of them because, truth be told, they were still human beings. Last night had been different, though. They had made her fight for her life. She didn't want to think about what she had done—murdering fellow human beings—even though she'd had no choice. It was either defend herself or die.

The woman wandered closer and stepped in the small puddle of vomit that Mel had expelled earlier. The Infected sniffed and looked down. More snarls and growls. Then, much to

Mel's disgust, the two squatted on the floor, brought their faces down, and lapped up the mess like dogs. That alone made Mel want to be sick again, but she held it in.

Unfortunately, they were between her and the way out. Maybe while they were distracted she could run around them.

But before she could bolt, Mary sniffed again and looked up, directly at Mel. The woman emitted a howling snarl and leapt forward with surprising agility. Reflexively, Mel swung the bat as if she was trying to knock one out of the ballpark. The club smashed into Mary's head, throwing her back into her husband, who was also viciously growling like an animal. Mel jumped to the side and then forward, attempting to skirt around the couple, but Bob reached out and grabbed her windbreaker, holding her back. Once again, Mel swung the bat, striking the man's arm. There was a loud snap and the man wailed. Mel was sure she had broken a bone. He let go of her jacket, but Mary had recovered from her blow and grabbed at Mel. The problem, Mel told herself, was that she wasn't hitting them hard enough. She shouldn't be afraid of hurting them—or killing them. Again, she struck with the weapon. This time, the bat hit the woman's neck, surely snapping it. The horrid noise coming out of her mouth abruptly ceased as her throat was crushed. The woman crumbled to the ground like a ragdoll.

Bob tried again for her, but Mel kept swinging wildly. He drew closer and then—*wham*, the bat walloped him in the head. He fell to his knees but kept grappling. She clouted him again, and this time he dropped to the floor, unconscious.

All was quiet, except for Mel's rapid breathing. She shut her eyes, said a silent prayer, and then looked at the bodies.

Were they dead?

Mel dared to linger and look closer. Mary was certainly still alive, for her eyes darted

around in terror and pain. Mel figured she must have severed the woman's spinal cord. The poor creature was now paralyzed.

Blood trickled out of the man's exposed ear, but he appeared to be breathing.

What have I become? she wondered.

The violence with which she had struck the poor people shocked her. Perhaps the events of the previous night had truly changed her outlook. She had crossed a line and now there was no going back. The bullets in the gun would have provided "clean" deaths to her friends, but since she had only two rounds, it was best to save those for Paul and her. Friends vs. family—there was no contest.

So should she put the woman out of her misery? It would be the humane thing to do.

Forgive me, she said to herself. Then Mel positioned herself over the Infected and raised her bat for a *coup de grace*—but she couldn't do it. Mary stared at her with anger, pain, and confusion.

God help me, but I frikkin' can't. These people were friends. Mel relaxed her arms and stood there a moment, shivering.

Let's get the hell out of here.

Without thinking, she ran blindly out of the building and into the perilous hell that was the street.

Nightmare Row.

2

7:00am.

The sun hurt her eyes. Upon setting foot outdoors, Mel had to squint against the brightness. She didn't remember the light being so intense before, and it was still early. Was it a side effect of being bitten? Despite the discomfort, Mel did her best to survey the boulevard. Her immediate vicinity was deserted, not a soul in sight. She pulled off the backpack, reached inside, and grabbed the sunglasses. Once they were on her head, her ability to see clearer improved.

Nightmare Row was a major northeast-southwest boulevard that led through what was known as New Town. It was a more modern area of an otherwise antiquated city that had existed for centuries. Areas such as Old Town and The Slums contained decor that was more akin to what one might see in Turkey. Hotel Harran had been a relatively new establishment, as were other tourist hotels that were located in New Town. Shops and familiar American franchises lined the boulevard for several blocks—*I'll have a Double Latte with an extra frikkin' shot of espresso, please,* Mel thought wryly. The stadium was to the northeast. Beyond that structure, where hundreds of people died two weeks earlier, she knew there were more modern buildings, such as high-rise apartments and government facilities. City Square was supposed to be a couple of miles away. On any other normal day, Mel could have walked that in twenty to twenty-five minutes.

Mixed in with the contemporary architecture was a conglomeration of styles that evoked Old World antiquity of the Middle East and, especially, Turkey. Since Harran was a tiny enclave on the eastern end of Turkey, between Armenia and Georgia, it was not surprising that the city

contained cultural and physical elements of all three countries. Most of the signage was in Arabic, which Mel couldn't read. However, a lot of it was also translated into English, especially in New Town.

Mel gazed south, where the shell of Hotel Harran stood a block away. Smoke still billowed from the blackened structure. During those awful two weeks after the Games, before the events of last night, there were approximately sixty people holed up in the place. Up until D-Day, as some of the survivors called the last day of the Games—D for "Disaster"—the hotel was completely full with several hundred occupants. Where did everyone go? Were they all killed that night at the stadium or in the streets? Were they hiding in other buildings? It was impossible to know.

She moved into the middle of the road and peered northeast. Sure enough, there were figures in the distance, more than a block away. If only she had a pair of binoculars, she'd be able to tell if they were Infected or survivors. However, they appeared to be moving slowly. Most likely Infected. She'd have to be careful and work her way along the sidewalks next to the buildings. Use natural cover as stopping places. How difficult could it be? The Guard at the hotel had said Nightmare Row was densely populated with Infected, but what she saw now wasn't what she'd call very crowded. There was also the possibility of uninfected survivors hiding in various spots along the road. What would happen if she encountered any? How would she deal with them? More importantly, how would they deal with *her*? After all, she was a threat—she'd been bitten—so she had to keep that fact very secret. Otherwise she might end up like some of the bitten people at the hotel who were exiled and thrown into the street.

Another danger that might lurk around any corner was the presence of gangs from the Slums. These were survivors that preyed upon other survivors; they had looted much of the city

and seized upon the opportunistic circumstances of the disaster. Mel suspected they were responsible for what happened at the hotel last night. Emil was right all along. It was sabotage. They'd created the breaches in the building's exterior.

Mel returned to the burned-up shop and began to walk forward along the storefronts and adjoining buildings. She moved to a parked, smashed-up car and crouched for a moment. All clear. Then she darted toward a depleted fruit and vegetable mart and squatted behind the empty wooden displays. No problem. From there Mel walked to and stood in an alcove that was a door to a building. All good so far. She continued this A to B to C method of moving, taking it slowly, always looking in every direction. Every now and then she heard a scream in the distance, and they weren't always the same voice. Since they weren't close by, though, she did her best to ignore them.

Unlike in American cities, narrow roads—alleys?—intersected her side of the street at variable intervals. Each one led down a path to residential housing that to Mel appeared more Old World. The guide had called these areas "medinas," which were essentially maze-like and typical of the region. She had to stop and peer around the corner each time to make sure it was safe to cross without being seen. When she'd advanced to the point where the next major intersection was maybe a hundred yards ahead, Mel came to one of those side streets. She stopped, as usual, at the edge of the building before peeking, but this time she heard movement. Scraping. The sound Infected made in the daytime when they moved like sleepwalkers. Mel clutched the bat, crouched, and carefully stuck out enough of her head so she could see. Sure enough, there were several Infected, wandering listlessly. These she didn't recognize. In fact, they looked as if they'd been around a while. The clothes on most of them were covered in dirt and bloodstains and who knew what else. One guy had a horrible gash down his face. A woman

walked—barely—on a foot that was unnaturally bent.

How the hell were they still living? Mel asked herself. Did feeding on people really sustain them? During the two weeks she was stuck at the hotel, a lot of information—and disinformation—was bandied about. At first people thought the Infected were like movie zombies—that dead people were coming back to life to feed on living humans. But that was eventually disproven. An Infected could be killed, and once it was dead, it was *dead*. In other words, the poor souls around the corner were still living human beings—just very sick ones. They apparently had a higher tolerance for pain, if they felt it at all. The members of the Guard weren't sure in the beginning, but the way one Infected screamed when it was hit by one of Sefu's Molotov cocktails and his clothes burst into flame—that definitely was a cry of pain. The woman with the broken ankle—could she feel *that*? If so, the Infected could withstand much more agony than a healthy individual, anytime, anywhere.

They were about fifty feet away. Mel couldn't cross and keep going without them seeing her. She looked behind her and noticed that she'd just passed an empty dry cleaners shop with a broken storefront window. Mel retreated and climbed through the opening in the shattered glass just as the Infected reached Nightmare Row. They still hadn't seen her.

Mel removed her sunglasses and took stock of the place. It was only then that she heard the flies and smelled the rotten, rancid odor. The buzzing came from the back of the store. Something had died in there. Even though it was dim behind the counter, Mel could see that clothes, covered with plastic garment bags, still hung on the conveyor. Already on edge, Mel didn't know what to do. The Infected outside were coming her way and would pass by the shop in a minute or two. She could easily hide in the back, but she also feared what might be there. She had to act quickly, so Mel pushed herself up onto the counter, swung her legs down on the

other side, and... her tennis shoes landed directed on the squishy body of a deceased woman. Mel couldn't help shrieking from the fright. She jerked away and nearly fell, then backed into the hanging plastic bags. She was so unnerved that the feel of the clothing on her back and head gave her another start and she shrieked again.

Damn!

She put her hand over her mouth when she saw the elderly woman lying on the floor in front of her. The victim had a huge, bloody hole in the front of her torso, and most of the major organs were missing. Once again, Mel gagged and had to turn away and fight to keep from vomiting. It helped to lose herself in the jungle of hanging cellophane bags. She worked her way to the back of the store, and it was there that she stumbled upon a second body—another woman—who was also missing her insides, as well as an arm.

Oh my God, my God, my God, Mel whispered repeatedly in her head as she shut her eyes. *Please don't let them come in, make them go past, make them go past*.

Standing perfectly still, she waited and counted the seconds. Finally, she heard the Infected outside the shop, breathing heavily, wheezing, and shuffling their feet along. Mel willed herself to be silent and invisible; she prayed that her scent did not waft out the shop and into the street. After a few minutes, though, they were gone. They hadn't detected her or the corpses. Mel forced herself to look at the dead woman again. She was no expert, but Mel figured the poor lady had been dead for a couple of weeks. Maybe the Infected only liked *fresh* meat. It made sense. That's why they weren't interested in the smell. The decay must have also masked *her* scent. That was good to know.

Was it safe to move on? Mel quickly surveyed the place; she rejected the notion of taking any clothing—she figured she wouldn't need them if she was going to turn in the next

twenty-four hours. Then she noticed a line stretched over a table with empty hangers on it. A white nylon cord, perfect for tying knots. Mel unfastened the rope, which was about ten feet long, then coiled it up and put it in her backpack. It could be useful.

"You never frikkin' know," she said aloud.

*

Mel continued her trek north. A to B to C. Again and again. The screams in the distance were less frequent, but they were just as blood-curdling.

Even the visible waves of heat, now scrolling upwards from the road itself, seemed to be exhibiting tendrils of hidden menace. And this was daylight! The danger was much worse at night.

She stopped when she spotted four Infected on the other side of the boulevard. Mel crouched in another alcove to wait for them to move on; hopefully they wouldn't see or smell her. They were a good forty yards across the road, which was wide enough for four lanes of traffic. Remnants of that traffic were visible everywhere—abandoned vehicles, burned-out cars, overturned vans and trucks. Mel wondered if any of them had the keys still in the ignition. She could hop in one and drive out of the city—but eventually she would come to the roadblocks that Harran's army—the Ministry, was that what they were called?—had set up. The Guard at the hotel learned early on that there was no evacuation of Harran. No one was being let out, so it was no use looking. Besides, navigating through the maze of derelict automobiles on Nightmare Row would be next to impossible. Someone would need a gigantic plow to scoop all the cars out of the way.

She crossed the first major intersection, looked east and west, and saw nothing. So far, so good. In the next block, Mel came upon a bakery. The mere thought of bread made her stomach

growl. For a while she had forgotten her hunger, but now that awareness clutched her abdomen. Again, the storefront window was smashed to pieces. It was apparent that looters had emptied the front cases of everything edible, but she dared to step through anyway to see if there were any crumbs left. The floor was dusty and dirty, but at least there were no bodies. Mel figured her search was hopeless, but she went around a partition to check the back where the ovens were located. To her amazement, there were a few loaves of two-week-old bread sitting on racks. Muttering, "Oh, thank God," she snatched one and bit into it. It was stale and hard and had some mold on one end—but it was *wonderful*. She took another loaf and stuck it in her backpack, and then continued to eat around the mold. The dryness of the meal made her thirstier. She had already begun to sweat a lot outside. Water was a priority. When you could be killed by Infected or turn into one, dying of dehydration instead would be pathetic. Mel tried the running water out of the sink, but it was brown. She resisted drinking it.

What was that?

A shiver went up her spine as she turned her head toward the street and listened.

Voices—just outside the shop. *Real* voices. Conversing. That meant whoever it was, they were uninfected. *Oh my God, they're coming in!* Mel quickly scooted around a large metal vat used for dough and stooped out of sight.

"Back here, man," a voice said.

She heard them come around from the front. They were in the room.

"Wow! You weren't kidding!"

"I told you, man!"

Three boys. Young. Well, they were teenagers, maybe three or four years younger than she. And they spoke American English.

"Eww, there's mold on them."

"Who cares?" That one bit into the loaf and asked with his mouth full, "'S'matter, aren't you hungry?"

"Yeah."

"You can thank me later."

She waited and listened while they ate.

"Carl, can you carry the rest of these?"

"Sure, grab 'em."

Then she heard a blessed sound—that of the unscrewing of a bottle. One of the boys was drinking something. She heard the strong gulps. *Water*.

"Ahhh, that was good."

Mel couldn't help it. She had to see more. She edged her head around the vat and saw three rather filthy boys who were older than she'd thought at first. Definitely Americans. She didn't recognize them from her hotel, though. Should she trust them? Should she talk to them? They didn't look dangerous.

Before she could make a move, one of the boys started meandering around the room, kicking debris. Mel jerked her head back and froze, completely helpless.

"Whoa! Hey!"

The boy jumped backwards when he saw her. "Holy shit, there's someone here!" His two companions joined him.

Mel stood up and held out her hands. "It's all right! I'm not infected!"

The boys huddled together, watching her with wide eyes. "What are you doing here?" one of them asked.

"The same as you. I was hungry."

"Are you bitten?"

She hated to lie. "No." Then she noted their soiled T-shirts. Each one was the same, adorned with a familiar logo. "You work for PIOT?"

They nodded.

"I was an athlete."

One boy looked sideways at her and asked, "Were you... were you in the parkour race?"

"Yep."

"Holy shit. I didn't think any of you survived that night. I'm Tom. This is Larry and Carl."

"Hi. I'm Mel."

No one shook hands. The boys were just as wary of her as she of them. They kept eyeing the bat in her hands.

"What happened to your bosses?" she asked.

Tom—"Huh?"

"PIOT. You said you worked for PIOT, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, I don't know if we work for them *anymore*, if you know what I mean. We don't know what happened to any of them. I think they're all dead. Everybody's dead. Our friends are dead. It's every man for himself out there." He put his hand to his mouth and muttered, "Or, woman, sorry."

She shook her head. "That's okay." She studied them. Were they a threat? They looked like good boys from a church youth group in the wrong place at the wrong time. She couldn't let them know she was bitten. In fact, she should just be on her way and not risk turning in front of

them. But the water...

"Where... where are you hiding out?" Carl asked.

"Nowhere. I'm on the street." The boys looked at each other. "What about you? You weren't at Hotel Harran."

"No, we were at PIOT's hotel, the Sahara. It burned down."

Mel almost laughed. "Same with Hotel Harran, too. When did it happen?"

"Four nights ago," Larry said. "The zombies came—a whole bunch of them. It was awful. Everyone in the hotel had to scatter."

"Sounds exactly like what happened where I was. That was last night." They kept staring at her as if they were unsure if she was real or not. She eyed the water bottle in Tom's hand and gave it a go. "Say, you couldn't spare any water, could you?"

Tom looked at Carl, who was wearing a backpack that appeared to be full of stuff. Carl immediately said, "Sure."

"Carl!" Larry whispered. "Wait..."

"What? We're not going to help her out?" Carl asked his friend.

"Damn right we will," Tom said.

Ashamed, Larry bowed his head and said, "Yeah, all right."

"Here, Mel." Carl dug into the pack and brought out two unopened bottles of water. Mel took them, opened one, and greedily gulped the precious liquid for several seconds.

"Wow, you were thirsty, huh?" Tom said.

"Thank you. Really," she answered. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She glanced over at the shelves, which were now empty. "I guess all the bread is gone,

huh?"

"Uh, you want one? We took 'em all," Carl said.

"That's okay. I have two." She stooped behind the vat and picked up the half-eaten loaf she'd dropped. "It's not a gourmet meal, but it's something, right?"

"Yeah."

They were still looking at her with astonishment painted all over their faces.

"What's the matter, haven't you seen any other survivors?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," Tom, replied, "but... well, not anyone... like you. I mean, girls. Like you. I have to say for someone who's been on the street, you look really good."

She couldn't help grinning. "Thanks. But I've been on the street for less than twelve hours."

The boys took her smile to mean she was susceptible to flattery. She accepted it for what it was, for she was used to it. Sometimes it was a curse that she was tall—five feet, eleven inches—and had long blonde hair. Her body was fit and muscular. Her blue eyes epitomized what she self-deprecatingly called The Phony All-American Girl. When younger boys at her high school gave her the hairy eyeball, she was flattered because she thought it was sort of cute. Not that she'd ever date a guy that young. On the other hand, the boys her own age in high school were like a pack of dogs. Always sniffing around. Her mother had warned her that it was the price you paid to be attractive, and she'd have to deal with it for her entire life.

Tom chuckled and said, "We probably smell and look like shit. You're... you're the best-looking thing we've seen in days. How old are you?"

She laughed. Boys were boys no matter what was going on. Here they were in the middle of a disaster area and they were *flirting* with her.

"Eighteen. How old are *you*?"

They looked at each other and shyly replied, "Sixteen," in unison.

"So what do you guys do out there? How do you survive?" she asked.

Tom shrugged and said, "In the daytime it's safer. We go out looking for food and supplies. You have to be careful though. The streets are swarming with Infected just off this main drag. They tend to congregate right outside a little later in the day. Then at night—well, you better be inside someplace safe."

"I know."

"And then there are gangs of *people*—uninfected—that terrorize other survivors, take their food and supplies, and sometimes kill them. You have to watch out for *them*, too."

Larry mumbled in an angry, low voice, "And there are snipers..."

"What?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, well, there's one sniper that we know about," Tom answered. "Probably just a crazy loner up in that tall building across from the park. He shoots at the Infected, mostly, but he's killed some survivors, too."

"Want to come back to where we're hiding?" Carl offered. "We found this building with some empty apartments. We hide there every night."

Mel wanted to ask them what they knew about the medicine that was supposed to come. If they weren't aware of it, she didn't want to clue them in. They might beat her to it. Selfish? She didn't think so. She needed it more than them.

"I'm... looking for my brother," she said, which was partially true. "He's younger than you. Twelve. Blonde, like me. Tall and skinny. Probably wearing an orange University of Texas T-shirt. You seen anyone like that?" The boys looked at each other and then shook their

heads. "Have you heard anything from the outside world? What's going on? Any news about help coming or not?"

Again, they shook their heads.

There was no need to hang around, so she started to move. She didn't want to turn in front of them. She hoped they survived whatever was happening in Harran.

"Well, it was nice meeting you," Mel said. "Thanks for the water."

"Which way are you going?" Tom asked.

She pointed northeast. "To City Square."

"No, don't do that!" Carl said. "That's a beehive of Infected!"

"Yeah," Tom said. "There's a nest near there."

"A nest?"

"Yeah. It's a school—I think it was a Harran high school—about a block away from the Square, on a big street that juts off the park. The Infected all hang out there, especially in the daytime. We had some guys at our hotel that went out and tried to figure out stuff about them. They thought a nest was like where they go to sleep or whatever they do to recharge."

"They also bring victims there to have their little group dinner or something," Carl added facetiously. "You don't want to go anywhere near there."

Larry grumbled, "We lost two of our friends there. There used to be six of us. They got Richard and Barry. Simon got shot by the sniper right around there just before that."

They were quiet for a few seconds before Tom added, "That was three days ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Mel said.

God, am I mad? she thought. What was she getting herself into? Maybe going for the medicine wasn't such a great idea. She was walking into a deathtrap. And yet—if it was true

what the boys said about the area, then it meant there really was an ever-so-slightly better possibility that Paul was there. Infected or not. If he was still alive. It was the best lead she'd received. And it was near the medicine drop point. Two birds with one stone. And if he was one of *them*, then maybe she could put him out of his misery with one of the bullets in her gun. If she found him. If, if, if.

"I have to go," she said. "I just continue up Nightmare Row, right?"

"Nightmare Row?"

"Oh, that's what the people at *my* hotel named this road."

Tom laughed. "That's a good one. Nightmare Row. That it is, that it is. Look, Mel, you're completely crazy if you want to go to City Square. We can't let you do that."

"Sorry, guys, just let me through, please."

Carl stepped forward. "Mel, listen—"

She'd had enough. Brandishing the bat, she snapped, "Don't come near me!" The boy jerked back in place. "Tell me where that school is!" She added, "so I can avoid it," because it sounded more reasonable.

"Put the bat down, Mel," Carl said, ready to step forward again.

"I mean it, Carl!" She felt unwarranted anger controlling her responses. *Crap! Am I turning? Why am I so pissed off at these guys?*

"I knew she was crazy," Larry muttered.

Shaken, Tom said, "Yeah, uh, you go straight up the road, I don't know, a couple more blocks and you get to the stadium. You know where that is, right?"

"I walked there a few times from my hotel. I know this stretch between the hotel and the stadium pretty well. And, yeah, maybe I *am* crazy."

"Well, keep going past the stadium another two or three blocks, I guess it's a mile. You'll come to a section that's real touristy—well, it used to be. You know, lots of Harran souvenir shops and restaurants and stuff. They're all looted and destroyed now. Then, another block and you'll get to the Square. It's really a park, a square park. This road connects to the, uh, bottom left corner of the park. Standing in the middle of the park is some kind of Harran government building."

"That's City Hall. And this nest?"

"Put the bat down, Mel, you can't go there."

"*I won't!* Just shut up and tell me! Please."

Resigned, Tom said, "You go straight up the left side of the park until you get to the top left corner. There another big street like this one juts off diagonally to the northwest. The school is on that street about a block from the park."

"Thanks." She couldn't understand what brought on the sudden maliciousness. It was as if she wanted to lash out at anything that moved. Mel got hold of herself, nodded at them, and said, "Thanks for the water. I'll be going now."

"Wait," Tom said. "Are you sure you don't want to stick with us? It might be safer."

She started walking past them. "No."

Tom called to her back, "All right, we'll just have to come with you. You can't go there alone!"

"Tom!" Larry said, "What the hell?"

"Whoa, Tom," Carl protested. "I think that's something you need to ask us about first, don't you think?"

Mel stopped and turned to them. Tom, the lovesick one, countered with, "Well, then, *I'll*

come with you. Just you and me."

She did *not* want Tom or any of them at her side. "No. Thank you."

"Then I'll follow behind you."

That did it. "Stop it!" she snapped. Then she rolled up her windbreaker sleeve. The bite was red, blue, and black. "Really want to come with me? Want me to come with you?" Tom gasped and the others just stared at the wound. "I thought so. I'll be seeing you." They let her move past them to the front of the bakery, and out she went.

3

9:00am.

Mel hurried along the side of the road, hoping the three boys wouldn't follow her. After a minute, she glanced back and didn't see them. Good. Now just stay the course and keep moving. What had gotten into her? Why had she been such a bitch? She didn't know the answers, but she couldn't help it—she still felt irritated by the boys, even though it was because of nothing they had done.

Please, I can't be turning yet. Please.

Maybe part of the disease is that angry, aggressive component she had seen first-hand in the Infected. Like them, she was *pissed off* all the time.

Don't think about it. Just keep going.

Getting out into the sun actually helped. She felt a lot better after having eaten the moldy bread and drinking some water. It was tempting to have a few more gulps, but she thought it best to conserve the precious commodity.

More figures appeared on the street in the distance. Survivors or not? Could Infected see that far ahead? She had to assume they were dangerous, whoever they were.

As she approached one of the side street intersections, a cluster of Infected rounded the corner. They were gazing at the street and hadn't turned toward her yet, but they were only thirty feet away.

Christ!

Without thinking, she leapt into the storefront on her left, the door of which was ajar. Removing her sunglasses, she found herself in what appeared to be a spice shop. Containers full

of herbs and colored powders were marked in Arabic and English—"cumin," "rosemary," "red pepper," and so on. The place smelled *fabulous.* Mel slipped around the counter, once again thankful that there were no corpses present. She sat on the floor and waited for the Infected to walk by the shop. Surely they had no reason to enter a spice store.

But as if on cue, a wave of nausea rolled over her trunk and she felt like vomiting again. She grew dizzy and put her head between her knees. When she opened her eyes, everything appeared to be much more *yellow,* as if she was looking through colored glass.

Let it pass, please, let it pass.

Mel closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift into a state of "nothingness." That's what Coach Barnes called it. He trained the athletes to breathe, empty all thoughts, and relax before a competition. Enter a state of Nothingness. Mel was as surprised as anyone that it actually worked. The exercise did help her relax before an event. She applied the same techniques now and found that it quelled the queasiness. It was difficult to cleanse her mind, though. Sounds and images from the past three weeks flitted through her brain. She floated through the memories and randomly focused on the incident four nights ago, when she acquired the revolver.

*

Mel and Paul had been stuck in Hotel Harran for a week-and-a-half. It was a good thing that the management had allowed all the guests who had rooms to remain in them after the crisis of that fateful Saturday night when the Games were attacked by Infected. It wasn't a pleasant situation. While there was still running water, it was undrinkable. The electricity was sporadic. There were nights without air conditioning, lights, or any other convenience that one simply took for granted, the management and the Guard decided to keep lights and A/C off to conserve

power. No one knew if that was even necessary, for most of the time the electricity worked. Tensions among the guests were high.

Paul was taking it very hard. Their parents were dead, which was bad enough, but the fact that they had no clue as to when they would be rescued was making his apprehension worse. Their mother had always called Paul a "sensitive boy," but the reality was that he had an anxiety disorder exacerbated by autism that was diagnosed very early in his life.

The front doors of the hotel were kept locked. Only the volunteer Guard members were allowed outside, and that was strictly during daylight to search the immediate vicinity for food and supplies. Mel had volunteered to be on the Guard, but she wasn't much use because she didn't feel right about killing Infected they often encountered. Still, the Guard wanted every able body they could get, so she was welcomed.

As far as anyone knew, official curfews were still in effect. The day after the parkour race, the police told the guests that no one was allowed outside after dark. At least televisions and computers still worked and they could get the news. To the rest of the world, a "mysterious epidemic" had hit Harran. An organization called the Global Relief Effort was working on a response. Nevertheless, the city-state was a war zone. For the entire first week, the hotel guests heard constant gunfire and explosions in the streets as the local police and military battled Infected. On the fifth day, the power was disrupted everywhere for twenty-four hours, but then it mysteriously returned. Cell phone coverage was fine for two days into the conflict—then all service was lost. By the seventh day, the streets grew eerily silent. The war was over—but it still wasn't safe to go outside.

The Infected had won.

The next few days were all about a series of second-hand reports from Guard members

who ventured out and took risks to explore beyond the hotel's immediate surroundings. The outlook wasn't good. Supposedly, road blocks had been set up on every passage out of Harran. Military forces from Harran's Ministry of Defense had arrived but weren't entering the city at all. Instead, they were protecting the borders and not allowing anyone out. No one, not even people who were allegedly healthy. One observer swore that he witnessed the soldiers shoot a man to death when he tried to run through the barricades.

On this particular evening, the third night of the second week of being blockaded in the hotel, Mel and her brother were in Suite 420, the room her father had booked for the whole family. It was disheartening that their parents' clothes and toiletries were still in the room, but what else could they do with them? Mel was in the act of holding Paul close in an attempt to comfort him for the umpteenth time. He had started crying again and was inconsolable. The only thing she could do was attempt to distract him. She talked to him about his favorite football team, the Texas Longhorns; in fact, Mel was planning to attend U.T. in the fall. Most of the shirts Paul had brought in his suitcase were variations of orange and white Longhorn swag. It was one of those things that was a symptom of his autism—her brother had made it a daily ritual to always wear an orange U.T. shirt and became upset if he couldn't.

Mel asked, "So have you decided if you're going to try out for the basketball team at school?" That was one thing, besides videogames, that Paul enjoyed, mainly because he was a skinny, tall string bean. Unfortunately, he was too sickly and nervous to be effective on a team, but she didn't say so. He'd never play for a team; although, miracles *did* happen, and maybe as he grew older, his temperament would change.

"I'm no good," he answered. "Not only would the opposing team eat me alive, so would my own teammates!"

"Oh, I don't know about that."

Paul was quiet for a few seconds, and then he added, "I don't want to be eaten alive." He snuggled closer into his sister.

She rubbed his head and said, "We're going to get out of here, don't you worry. I'm confident we will. You're being so brave. I'm proud of you. Mom and Dad would be proud, too."

"I miss them."

"So do I. So do I."

Another pause, then—"I'm hungry."

"Hmm, me, too. Why don't I go downstairs and see if they've come up with anything for us to eat, okay?" Once the hotel's restaurant ran out of food, it had been tough trying to feed everyone. They now depended on the Guard to go out and find essentials, which sadly were not plentiful.

"You'll come right back?"

"Of course. Just stay here."

"I ain't going anywhere!"

They both laughed a little at that undeniable truth, and then she got up to leave the room. Making sure she had her key card, Mel shut the door behind her and walked down the hall toward the stairwell. But as she passed Room 408, she heard a gunshot behind the door. She halted. Another shot. She looked up and down the hallway. Didn't anyone else hear it? The door to the room was ajar. Should she go in? What was going on? She knew the family of five that was in there. The Sinclairs, from England. Susan, the oldest child, was in the Games but had disappeared after the attack. Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair and their two younger children—a boy

and a girl—remained, hoping like the rest of them that help would come and that maybe Susan was still alive.

A third shot rang out. And then a fourth.

Mel opened the door to see a short corridor that led to the outer room of the suite. She knocked. "Mr. Sinclair? Mrs. Sinclair? Hello?" Silence. "Hello? What's going on? Mr. Sinclair?"

Filled with dread, Mel crept inside. She entered the common space—it was as trashed as her own, but more so since there were two more souls living there. Clothing, toys, and garbage littered the place. Mel gazed at the two closed bedroom doors. The kids were in one room and the parents in the other.

Oh my God, is it going to be what I think it is?

Putting her apprehension aside, she opened the door on the left—the kids' room. Empty. Just unmade beds and more garbage and clothes. Then, after taking a breath and swallowing hard, she opened the other door.

She gasped and shut her eyes as the horrible image burned into her brain. All four of them were sprawled on the king-sized bed. Blood and grey matter had splattered the wall and now soaked the sheets and pillowcases.

Mr. Sinclair had executed his wife and two children, and then turned the gun on himself.

Mel closed the door and walked away as she felt tears running down her face. But when she reached the door to the hallway, a thought struck her.

A gun.

She had never fired a gun in her life, but perhaps it was something she could use. Mel returned to the door, steeled her nerves, and went in. It wasn't so bad this time. She hated to

admit it, but she was growing too accustomed to the sight of bloody corpses. Before coming to Harran, she might have run far away and fought nightmares for weeks after having discovering the Sinclairs. Not now.

Mr. Sinclair's right hand still held the piece. Mel gingerly pried it from his fingers. It was still warm and smoking, and heavier than she'd expected. "Colt" was engraved on the side.

How the hell did you get this frikkin' gun in Harran? she wondered. Surely he didn't bring it with him from England? Their gun laws were very strict, and Harran's were supposedly worse. The only thing she could imagine was that perhaps the man had purchased it somehow after arriving. It didn't really matter, did it? The point was that here was a weapon.

She examined the thing—it had a cylinder and a safety catch. A revolver—she knew that much. Mel fiddled with the gun, flicked a different catch, and released the cylinder. She looked at the six compartments and determined there were only two bullets. Mr. Sinclair had used the other four on his family and himself. Did he have more? Mel spent a few minutes searching the nightstands and dressers, as well as the open suitcases that obviously belonged to the adults. Nothing. No more ammunition.

What the hell, at least I've got two dead zombies in my hand, she thought. Better than nothing. She tucked the handgun in her pants, drew her windbreaker around it to cover it, and then left the room to continue her mission downstairs, and also report the deaths.

*

Mel's reverie was interrupted by the sound of footsteps entering the front door of the spice shop. Abruptly alert—the nausea abated—Mel clutched the bat and sat as silently as she could.

There were four of them. Three men and a woman.

All Infected.

4

The Infected must have smelled her; that was the only reason Mel could think of why they would enter the spice shop. Apparently the odor of rotten corpses masked the scent of fresh humans, but strong spices didn't!

She was positioned behind two rucksacks of pungent curry powder, but she could see between them. One man and the woman appeared to be Caucasian, and the other two men were dressed in Harran Arabic caftans. Their clothes and skin were filthy and they had blood stains on their faces and around their mouths. Mel found it creepy to think that when the Infected growled and snarled at each other, it was almost as if they were communicating to each other. Hell, they *were* conversing. Just like that woman, Mary, these Infected slipped in an English word now and then. Growl, snarl, *hungry*, growl. Snarl, growl, *meat*, snarl.

Then Mel got a shock. She recognized the Caucasian man. He was Jakub, one of the athletes, from Hungary. He participated in the parkour race and was also present at Hotel Harran during the two weeks after D-Day. Mel had actually gotten to know him—and he was a real jerk. Also eighteen, Jakub was handsome, strong, and a tremendously talented contestant; but he was also a womanizer, a smart-ass, and a rapist. Well, he was almost one. Mel had no idea if he had done to other girls what he had tried to do to her.

*

It was the beginning of the second week of being blockaded in the hotel.

"There you are," Jakub said as he came down the stairs to the third floor landing. The stairwell in the hotel was an echo chamber; it bounced voices around. The place was deserted at that time of night. Mel was in the process of climbing up from the ground floor after spending

some time in the guest gymnasium.

"What do you want, Jakub? It's after midnight. Why aren't you in bed?" she asked as they met on the landing.

"I could ask you the same thing," he said in a thick accent. She was dressed in gym clothes and was sweaty and tired. Nevertheless, he gazed up and down at her body and didn't attempt to hide it.

"I was in the gym. I go down there after Paul's asleep. It's when I can be alone."

"Perfect," he said. "Then *we* can be alone now, too."

She tried to push past him. "Uh uh, sorry Jakub, but I'm really tired." The week prior to the Games, Jakub had mercilessly flirted with her to the point of being obnoxious. He was like the rich boys at school who felt they were entitled to everything. Jakub had asked her out three or four times, but she had no interest in him. Oddly, her type of guy was a more studious, artistic fellow who could make her laugh. She liked musicians and writers.

He grabbed her arm and held her back. "Wait, Mel, let's talk."

"Let go of my arm, Jakub. I mean it."

"Why do you reject me? Why did you not go out with me last week before the Games started?"

"Jakub, going on a date was not a priority. I was concentrating on the Games. And sorry to burst your bubble, but I wasn't interested. I'm still not. So please let me by."

"No." This time the smarmy smile vanished and he pushed her roughly against the stairwell wall. The move frightened her. He gripped both of her upper arms. "You *owe* me, remember? I saved your life!"

"Jakub! Let me go! Jakub!"

"Mel, you are so beautiful, you know that?" He leaned in to kiss her, but she turned her head.

"Stop, damn it! Stop! I mean it!"

"What will you do, scream? No one will hear you. Everyone is asleep except the few Guards on duty and they're three floors below us."

"Jakub, I swear, if you don't let me go..."

He tried kissing her again. This time she fought and struggled to get away, but he held her tightly. She tried to knee him in the groin as a last resort, but he was expecting it and effectively blocked her.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, that's a dirty play," he said. "Just for that..." He used all of his strength to throw her to the cement floor. He was on top of her before she could roll away.

This time she did scream.

"Go ahead! Scream all you want! That's right!"

He pawed her body with the subtlety of a grizzly bear and nuzzled her neck with his unshaven, bristly face. Mel fought him but that just seemed to spur him on, and then he—

*

The female Infected moved closer to where Mel was hiding, jolting the teenager out of her remembrance. Back in the moment, Mel once again prayed that they would simply leave, but it didn't look like that was going to happen.

Go away! she willed, but it was futile. Jakub joined the woman and said, "Smell," amongst his throaty noises. They sluggishly moved closer, wheezing as they walked. A yellow string of mucus hung from one of the woman's nostrils. When she turned, Mel could see that the side of her head was bruised and bloody. Jakub, on the other hand, looked fit and well—albeit

grimy, unshaven, and golden-eyed. He did have what seemed to be a more serious case of the salivating disorder all Infected possessed. It was as if he was foaming at the mouth, like a rabid dog.

They were all recently turned. Jakub had been at the hotel last night, which meant he would have been bitten around the same time as she. And yet, she hadn't turned. If Jakub had already turned, did that mean she could do so at any minute?

The situation intensified when one of the other Infected walked into an open rucksack of curry powder, tipping it over and filling the air with the spice. Surprisingly, the Infected began to cough and swat at their eyes. They definitely felt the curry burning their eyes! At the same time, though, it gave Mel the urge to sneeze, too. She put her index finger on her upper lip and pressed hard—but the need was too strong.

She sneezed and all hell broke loose.

All four Infected came at her as they howled in their gargling way. Mel jumped to her feet with the bat ready. She swung it at them but hit a jar of red spice on a shelf, shattering it and scattering its contents into the air. This created a crimson cloud that the Infected plowed through with impunity. Mel backed up as she continued to swing the bat, barely keeping them at bay—and they continued to move forward. It wasn't long before she was in the corner of the room. Nowhere else to go.

"Stay away from me, Jakub!" she shouted.

The young Infected's eyes seemed to widen as she spoke his name. He shouted unintelligible words, and then he and his companions halted their advance. Jakub garbled more growling enunciations and then shakily pointed at her. Mel clearly heard him say, "Bitch," amongst the other snarls. Then he *grinned* as a string of drool dripped from the edge of his

mouth.

Mel sensed that they were about to collectively pounce on her, so she attacked first. She cried, "*Get away!*" and then swung the bat as if she was hitting successive home runs, striking the creatures wherever she could. The woman went down quickly with one blow, but the three men remained standing, despite being clobbered hard on the shoulders and arms. *Hit the head, the HEAD!* she commanded herself, but the heat of the moment and sheer terror of facing the assailants spoiled her aim. Nevertheless, she kept at it, striking one of the Harranites so hard that he let loose an unearthly yelp and fell to the floor. His body twitched grotesquely. Her concentration on him, however, gave Jakub and the other Harranite the opportunity to grab her swinging arm and waist. Before she could respond, they threw her to the floor. The bat fell away from her hands as she punched and kicked the two men as they crouched over her.

Their jaws snapped loudly and repeatedly, as if they were sharks attempting to devour prey that was just beyond their reach.

Mel screamed as she struggled and fought to keep them biting her; but she knew it would be impossible to keep up the battle forever. Her right hand brushed against a pile of the spilled curry spice, so she grabbed a palm full and threw it at both men. They reacted violently to the sting in their yellow eyes, providing her with the opening to deliver a lucky kick to the Harranite's face. This slammed him back and off of her. The bat was five feet to her left, so she attempted to scoot away from Jakub and grab it—but he clasped her right leg and moved in, teeth snapping. Again, she kicked with both feet as hard and quickly as she could, which was successful in loosening his grip. Her shoes battered his nose, his mouth, and his eyes, but he seemed to brush off the blows. Mel stretched her left arm as far as it would go... but she was still mere inches from the weapon. At that close proximity, Jakub reeked of soiled trousers and sweat

as his slobber dripped on her jeans. Apparently Infected lost control of basic bodily functions and were incontinent. If their bites didn't kill her, the stench would. There was only one thing to do before the other Infected rejoined the melee, and that was to fight Jakub's aggression with more of her own. She yelled as if it was a last ditch attempt at saving her life, rose from the floor just enough to gain some leverage, and then body-blocked the brute with her entire weight. Jakub fell backwards, giving her a precious few seconds to then twist and crawl for the bat. With it firmly in her grasp, she swung the weapon just in time to slam it hard into the head of the first Harranite, who had recovered from his previous injuries and moved in for another swipe at his quarry. The bat must have crushed the Infected's skull, for he immediately went limp and collapsed.

Mel wiggled away from the Harranite and managed to stand. Breathing heavily, she watched Jakub slowly turn his body and struggle to stand again.

The memory of that night in the stairwell returned—

*

—pulled at her T-shirt, ripping the front and exposing her sports bra. Mel continued to shout and struggle with Jakub, who was uncommonly strong.

"Come on, Mel, you know you want it!" he said through his teeth. The boy's eyes were on fire and he was well beyond reasoning.

"No! No!" Mel cried, but she was defenseless. He held her arms above her head on the floor with one hand and started to pull down her gym shorts with the other. She tried kicking with her legs again, but he managed to lock his own legs over hers.

My God, he's going to—no, no!

"Stop fighting!" he snapped. "You're making it worse!"

"No!"

With that, she managed to free her right leg and plunge the knee up between his legs and smash it into his groin. Hard. Jakub inhaled noisily and his eyes went wide with shock. His body froze, allowing her to push him off of her and roll out. The Hungarian boy instinctively curled into a fetal position and hollered in pain. Mel didn't wait around—she leapt to her feet and ran up the stairs, two at a time, until she reached the safety of Suite 420.

Jakub avoided her for the rest of that week.

*

The Infected's growl brought her back to the here and now. Jakub was on his feet.

"Jakub! Stop!" she shouted as she raised the bat overhead, but the former Hungarian athlete smiled in that sickly way again and barked incoherent half-words and snarls. He bared his teeth, cracked them together, and then rushed at her. Mel brought her weapon down with as much strength as she could muster, striking him on the frontal lobe of his skull. She heard a cracking thud. Jakub gagged for a second, stumbled, and then fell forward on his face. Without hesitation, Mel then attacked the others and made sure *they* wouldn't be reviving any time soon.

When it was all over, the only sound in the place was her heavy breathing. She stood there, the bloody bat in hand, and surveyed her handiwork.

She had killed six people in the last twelve hours, Mel wasn't sure how she felt about it.

Now, as Mel stood in the spice shop and gazed at the destruction she had wrought, she began to shiver. Jakub's body lay broken before her, blood issuing from his ears and mouth. The recollection of that awful incident in the stairwell bubbled into a rage she had never experienced before. Tears came to her eyes. Blurting hysterically, "How dare you, how dare you," she raised the bat and irrationally pummeled the Infected's head and body until it was a

gooey pulp.

Then she dropped the bat, collapsed back in the corner of the shop, put her head in her hands, and sobbed uncontrollably.

5

10:00am.

A male human voice startled Mel. She jumped and shrieked, and then involuntarily grabbed the bat. She lashed out at an elderly man wearing a caftan. "*Aasef! Aasef!*" he cried, raising his hands defensively. Mel got hold of herself. He was a survivor, not an Infected. A Harranite. Probably in his sixties or seventies. He looked thin and tired, was unarmed, and was most likely completely harmless.

When he saw that she had let down her guard, the man began to babble in Arabic. Mel didn't understand a word. She had learned some basic etiquette phrases in preparation of her visit to the city-state, but deciphering a litany of the exotic language was impossible.

"Wait, wait," she said. "Slow down, whoa."

He asked something, and Mel recognized the word *Amrekiah*. "Yes, yes, I'm American," she answered. "Sorry, uh, English? Speak English?"

The man shook his head and managed, "No English, no English." He started talking again and gesturing to the four corpses with a tone Mel couldn't quite comprehend. Was he congratulating her on killing the Infected or was he upset?

"I don't understand, sorry, uh, *aasef."*

He went over to the counter, patted it, and then slapped his chest. The man then put his hand in a spice jar, let the granules flow through his fingers, and then he tapped his chest again. It was like playing Charades.

Mel got it. "Oh, you *own* this shop? You owner? Boss?" She pointed to floor and then to him. The man nodded and smiled. Then he touched his breast again and said, "Ahmad.

Ahmad."

"Ahmad? That's your name?"

"Uh huh, uh huh," the man said as he nodded, grinning even more.

"Oh, uh, Mel," she said, indicating herself. "Mel."

"Mel." He seemed very happy to meet her.

"Yeah. Listen, I won't bother you anymore. Sorry about the mess. I'll be moving on." She picked up her things and made for the door but Ahmad kept jabbering in Arabic and called her name before she got to the door. She turned and saw him holding an apple in one hand. That's when she realized there was a bag around his shoulder, and it carried what appeared to be several of them. The fruit didn't look fresh and had blemishes on it, but it was mighty tempting anyway.

"For me?"

The old man insisted on offering the apple. Finally, Mel went to him and accepted it. "Thank you," she said, and then she remembered the correct Arabic equivalent. "*Shokran*."

"*Al'afw*."

Ahmad then began to work around the shop, picking up spilled items and stepping around the bodies. Mel bit into the fruit and it tasted delicious. She stood by the counter and watched the poor storekeeper attempt to bring order to his little world, despite the fact that four vicious Infected corpses were draped across a good portion of the floor space. Did he think he was going to get customers that day? And where did he come from? Mel studied the shop's interior more closely and saw a door she hadn't noticed before on the other side of the counter. It was ajar, revealing stairs that led up to what she assumed to be the man's home.

Watching the shopkeeper reminded her of something that occurred the week before the

Games, shortly after her family had arrived in Harran.

*

It was Saturday, their third night in the city. Mel, her brother Paul, and her mother and father, Janine and Gary Wyatt, were on a guided tour of Harran. PIOT, the international youth organization—"Peace In Our Time"—had arranged for all the Games' competing athletes and their families to take sightseeing excursions and offered a number of them from which to choose, based on the athletes' preparation schedules. The Games were to be Wednesday through the next Saturday. Most of the contestants arrived the prior Wednesday or Thursday in order to begin on-site training at the stadium for a few hours a day. There was room in the agenda for everyone to see not only Harran and its many landmarks, but also go on outings into Turkey, Armenia, or Georgia if they wished. The Wyatts preferred to thoroughly explore Harran during their time abroad. When Mel had finished with orientation and publicity photos the day before, on Friday, the family investigated New Town and a heritage park known as Fisherman's Village. Then, on Saturday, Mel and her family went to Old Town, where they had settled at a recommended kabob house for dinner. The place had an outdoor sidewalk dining area that faced a square and a souq, or open-air marketplace. The sun had set, but twinkle lights strung across the narrow streets provided a lively, festive atmosphere.

Mel and her family sat at a table with other Games participants, including her new friend from England, Lucy, and her parents. Mel and Lucy had hit it off from the get-go. They were the same age and were both trained in parkour. Lucy was a brunette and thus provided a pleasing complement to Mel the blonde. For the first several days of their Harran adventure, before the Games began, male athletes referred to them as the "Deadly Duo."

The conversation was animated and a good time was being had by all, when the guide

reminded everyone that they had to be back on the bus at nine o'clock. Mel's father noted the time as being 8:50pm on the wristwatch her mother had given him for his birthday. He loved the timepiece and couldn't stop playing with it, as it performed multiple functions. It was distinctively gorgeous, too, being a silver Victorinox Maverick GS Chronograph with a unidirectional rotating bezel and tachymeter-scale dial. Lucy's dad noticed it and commented on it, which only encouraged her father to show it off—and that was when a disturbing shriek of rage drifted out of the night air. At first Mel thought the noise was some kind of siren; but as it kept starting and stopping at various intervals, it soon became apparent that a human being was causing the commotion. It was like nails on a blackboard. The diners continued to finish their meal and converse, but it wasn't long before several Harranites, including women and children, ran into the square from a side street. They were obviously in distress, and several of the women were calling out in fright. There was no need to translate the Arabic word for "Help." A few seconds behind them came the source of the irritating yelling—an elderly man wearing a caftan. He was in a state of hysteria, chasing the group ahead of him as if he wanted slaughter them. But when he got to the square, he stopped running, ceased screaming, and then turned in circles as if he was suddenly confused as to where he was. Everyone in the kabob house was shocked by his disheveled appearance and the menace emanating from his slight, fragile body. A good Samaritan, another Harranite, approached the crazed man and spoke kindly to him, offering to help. The old man jerked his head at the newcomer, made an unintelligible noise, and then *attacked*. He was like a cornered, frightened cat or dog, and the animal was forced to protect itself. But this was no defense—the older Harranite jumped on the other man, tackled him to the ground, and began to beat him senseless. People in the restaurant stood and called for help as bystanders gathered to watch, afraid to interfere. When the victim was completely helpless, the

old man strangled him. Witnesses pleaded in Arabic for the lunatic to stop. Mel's father shouted, "Somebody stop him! Where are the police?"

In answer to Gary Wyatt's entreaty, whistles blew and several Harran policemen rushed into the square. They surrounded the old man, who stood and left his victim dead on the ground.

"Is that man crazy?" Paul asked his mother with a bit of a whimper.

"There's something wrong with him, honey," Janine Wyatt told him, but she was just as bothered by the spectacle.

Police shouted commands at the man, but the killer was defiant. He unexpectedly bolted down the street from which he came, and the cops set off in pursuit. The yelling and uproar faded until an ambulance and more police cars arrived on the scene. By then, the Wyatts and their friends had had enough. Shaken, they asked the guide to escort them back to New Town and their hotel. It had been a rough night in Harran, and they wanted to be in the safety of their more Westernized accommodations.

Later that night, Mel overheard her parents talking about what they'd seen. "Is this place really safe?" her mother asked her father.

"It's supposed to be!" was all he could say in reply.

Up to that point, Mel hadn't seen anything remotely strange or dangerous since arriving. She told herself that she was in another part of the world where the culture was different and the customs were alien.

Should she be concerned?

*

The spice shopkeeper reminded Mel of that demented man in Old Town's square. What had happened to the poor guy? Did the police catch him? Was he killed? She and her family

found out from the news the next day that the bystander who had stepped in to help was indeed dead on arrival at the hospital. She had witnessed the murder of a human being, right in front of her eyes. That was a first.

But compared to what she'd seen in the last twenty-four hours, that was nothing.

Mel shook away the memory, finished the apple, and dropped the core in a bin by the counter. "*Shokran*," she said again to her benefactor, and then abruptly left the shop. Ahmad kept talking to her, but she ignored him and kept walking. Mel appreciated the man's kindness and friendliness, but she was afraid to be around anyone who was uninfected. Just like when she'd seen the three boys earlier, what if she began to turn in front of him? *She* was dangerous. She couldn't trust herself to be around healthy humans. Solitude was preferable, even though there was supposedly safety in numbers. Was the desire to be alone a part of the sickness? Whatever—Mel decided it was best to avoid anyone, infected or not.

As soon as she was on the street, Mel looked both ways, and continued her journey north.

6

11:00am.

The apple made Mel feel nauseated. As she moved farther north on Nightmare Row, the flu-like symptoms hit her more strongly than before. Her vision exhibited that yellow tint again and her head felt as if was loaded with lead. She reached one of the side alleys just as the urge to throw up became so overwhelming that she quickly ducked around the corner and wretched. Thank goodness there were no Infected waiting to ambush her. The vomiting made her legs weak, so she sat down on the ground with her back against the building. The stench of her puke was horrible, so she forced herself to stand and move to the other side of the alley and plop down there for a few minutes.

Need to rest...

She dug into the backpack to retrieve the water bottle she had started earlier. A few swigs washed the foul taste out of her mouth. Mel was tempted to finish what was left, but that would leave her with only one more full bottle, so she twisted on the cap and put it away. She considered it a small victory that she had the willpower to do so. Three or four more swallows were saved!

It was late morning and the sun was truly hot now. She hadn't made it as far as she'd hoped since starting out that morning. There was still a long way to go to get to the park. She hadn't even come to the stadium yet. She felt rotten and didn't know if she could find the strength to stand again and keep moving. Should she grab the revolver and shoot herself now? Was she about to turn? The sickness was worse. Her bitterness for the situation prompted her to start laying blame. It was all because of the goddamned Games. Mel regretted ever trying out

for them.

She found the gun—it somehow seemed heavier—and pointed it at her temple for the second time that day.

It would be so easy! Just squeeze the trigger and end it all. Eliminate the world of one more potential Infected. Do it!

But she hesitated and ultimately brought down her arm. She wanted to cry again and feel sorry for herself, but instead she repeated the mantra, *Just rest a while. Maybe you'll feel better in a bit. Breathe deeply and go into the state of nothingness...*

*

"You're frikkin' going to games, Wyatt," Coach Barnes told her after the tryouts. "Congratulations, I'm proud of you."

That filled Mel's heart with joy. It meant a lot to hear coach say that. She respected him a great deal. Besides, she had picked up her habit of saying the word "frikkin'" from him!

Wow, chosen to participate in the Harran Global Athletic Games! When Coach Barnes back home announced last February that she alone would represent her high school, she felt very honored. She was a senior at the time, so by the time the Games took place that summer, she would have already graduated and would be preparing to attend her freshman year at college. Nevertheless, it was an honor to be able to run in the parkour race for good old Austin High. It also helped that she was an experienced equestrian. The Games people were planning to utilize horses in the opening ceremony. Mel had ridden since she was seven years old and considered herself to have a way with the animals.

Parkour was relatively new in the phys ed curriculum at school. It began as an after-school interest group but developed into a full prospectus, just as the rest of the world's youth

became entranced with the exotic running sport as well.

Mel considered parkour as more of a discipline rather than a sport. Nevertheless, it was extremely physical. The principles involved using the body and one's surroundings to propel forward as quickly as possible. Hence, there was a lot of jumping and running and climbing and rolling and just about any other corporal act she could name. For races, man-made obstacles were placed around the track; they could be quickly moved, changed, and repositioned between laps. Runners became what one sports critic described as "watching a bunch of athletes with the abilities of Spider-Man." After a couple of years of parkour participation, Mel's coach pronounced her as a tremendous athlete and that she had the capability of "bringing home the gold."

The Games were sponsored by an international youth organization called PIOT. In what seemed to be a rapid ascent into the public eye, PIOT became something of a teenage Rotary Club, with chapters all over the world. The announcement of putting on the Harran Global Athletic Games attracted attention mostly because of the proposed location. Harran? Sure, it was a place with a long and fascinating history. It was a one-stop-shopping travel destination for anyone wanting to experience the Islamic universe of Eastern Turkey, or the more Christian countries of Armenia or Georgia. Was it Europe? Was it Asia? Mel didn't know and didn't care. It was going to be exciting. PIOT was promoting the event as a statement for world peace. It differed from the Olympics simply because it utilized non-professional student athletes in their late teens—the U.S. equivalent of high school age. They could try out for various track and field events, including parkour. Mel made the cut, so she and her family made the plans to travel together to the exotic city-state for the event.

Other track and field competitions at the Games drew their influence from the ancient

Greeks. There was wrestling, javelin and discus throwing, long jumping, and various types of foot races of different lengths. These would all take place on a Wednesday through Saturday. The main attraction of the event, however, would be the parkour race on Saturday night.

When the moment finally arrived, the Wyatts flew the short stint from Austin to Houston, but then the trip over to Munich was long. Paul was apprehensive, as usual, but he seemed to be enjoying the novelty of the adventure the family was having anyway. From Munich they flew to Harran. When they arrived on a Thursday, Mel's first impression of the city-state was that it captured *exactly* what her imagination had suggested it would be. The place crowded, busy, and steeped in a culture very foreign to her own. The food, clothing, and language was as far away as one could get from Austin, Texas. Many of the men wore fezzes, which Paul thought was cool; he immediately wanted one to wear, too. Essentially once a jewel of the Ottoman Empire, Harran was strange and wonderful, old and modern, and unique in its solitary history.

The recently built Harran Hotel was one of several in the city utilized by PIOT and the athletes. The Wyatts were impressed that such a contemporary structure could co-exist with all of the antiquity surrounding it. The building had all the amenities—a suite with two bedrooms, a dining room, a gym, Internet access, and a pool. It was within walking distance of Harran Stadium, where the Games were to take place. Another reason for having the event in Harran was that the landmark stadium was celebrating its inauguration. It was intended to be one of the city-state's major attractions for tourists because of the hope it would be often-used for important sports events. It was because of the stadium that New Town was built up around it.

And if anyone didn't feel like walking there from the hotel, shuttle buses were also provided.

The families of most of the teen athletes accompanied them to the Games. With the

media and spectators traveling to see the Games, it meant thousands of people from distant parts descended upon Harran that week. Actually, Mel had expected more media presence. Her father reminded her that the Games were not the same as the Olympics. The athletes were required to spend a half-day at the stadium on Saturday through Tuesday for training and rehearsal of the Tuesday night opening ceremony, in which Mel had volunteered to ride a horse. The free time could be spent sightseeing. Harran's public leaders seemed to be bending over backwards to make all the visitors feel welcome. President Hamid addressed all the athletes at the first gathering on the Friday after Mel's arrival, thanking them for their abilities and bringing "world peace" to Harran.

*

World Peace. Yeah, right.

Boy, did they get *that* one wrong.

The anger Mel felt about the predicament actually brought her out of the queasiness. Her stomach was fine, so she splurged and had another drink of water before standing.

Anger helps revive me for some reason.

It was now evident that the flu-like symptoms came and went. She wasn't sure yet, but she guessed that the intervals between the "attacks" were growing closer together. At this point, though, they were unpredictable. One thing was certain—she hadn't turned yet. From her experience, the people she had seen turn did so within a few hours of being bitten. Others, though, didn't turn for twenty-four hours or more. The Guard had no concrete data, but one guy they had exiled to the street after he was bitten didn't turn for nearly thirty hours. The victim stuck around outside the hotel because he had nowhere else to go, and they watched him turn through the windows. Maybe it had something to do with a person's genetic makeup.

So far, Mel had lasted approximately thirteen hours. Not bad. That was encouraging. Maybe she just had good genes.

She started to walk but realized she was still holding the revolver. After returning it to the backpack, Mel picked up the baseball bat and moved on.

7

12:30pm.

Mel eventually traversed another big intersection just as three Infected meandered toward her from the cross street. They saw her, growled, and moved a little faster. Mel started running, easily leaving them behind, but more Infected appeared in the block ahead, some distance away. They spotted the athlete, though, and headed for her. Mel slowed to a trot, looked behind her to see where the first group was, and realized she was trapped. Infected in front and behind. Luckily, it was mid-day and they advanced like molasses. She picked up the pace until she was at racing speed. Several more Infected seemed to come out of the woodwork, drawn to the movement of the young woman. The Infected in front of her were fifty yards ahead—then forty, thirty, twenty... The creatures instinctively spread out in order to catch her, so she readied the baseball bat and prepared for impact. The momentum she had generated drove her into the group with tremendous force; it was as if bowling pins were hit by a ball. She swung the bat and knocked one man away as she broke through the line. The Infected screeched and attempted to follow her, but they simply didn't have the locomotion. Within a minute, Mel had out-distanced them enough to slow down and catch her breath.

For a few seconds she felt dizzy and was afraid she would be sick again, but it passed quickly. She moved to the side of the road and huddled in a storefront alcove until her thumping heart slowed. So what did she learn just now? She could definitely outrun Infected. If she ran all the way to the stadium and beyond, she'd be there in a few minutes. However, running down the street also attracted attention.

Fine. I'll run only if and when I have to.

She moved on at her slower, A to B to C method of advancing. Best to seek cover, stop, look, and then proceed. Cover, stop, look, proceed. And again.

When she reached the middle of the current block, she encountered a barrier created out of wrecked vehicles. A bus and several cars—some of which were still smoldering after having been burned to a crisp—were in a line across the road. The only egress was a five-foot-wide space in the very middle that served as an artificial "gate" through the barrier. The vehicles stretched all the way to the buildings on both sides of the street. The only way forward was through that center gap.

Mel scanned both sides of the street. No one was around. What purpose did the blockade serve? Was she free to go through and continue her journey? She didn't see why not. If there wasn't anyone present to stop her then...

She walked to the opening and started to move forward when two gunshots pierced the air. The rounds hit the pavement frighteningly close to Mel's feet, splintering the asphalt, and forcing her to jump back.

"Hey!" she shouted. "What the hell!"

Where did the shots come from? Was this that sniper she had heard about? To her the two discharges sounded as if the guns were directly above her. Looking up, she saw nothing, but then she scrutinized the buildings on both sides. A man leaned out of a fourth floor window to her left. He pointed a rifle at her. Another man with a gun was visible in the third floor window of the building to her right.

Gunshots in stereo. Great.

One of the shooters shouted something in Arabic.

"I don't speak Arabic!" Mel answered.

Both men ducked into their respective buildings. For a few seconds, Mel wasn't sure what she was supposed to do. A different man appeared in the window to the left. He called out in English, "Are you bitten?"

Once again, the lie. "No!"

"What are you doing here?"

"I want to go through! I'm looking for my brother!"

"Wait there!"

I don't have time for this, she thought. Mel heard some rustling on the other side of the barrier, and after a minute three armed men came out of the building on the left. The man who had spoken English was in front. He appeared to be in his forties, had serious facial hair, and wore a fez.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Does that really matter?" she asked, incredulous. "My name is Mel, I was an athlete in the Games, and I'm a survivor."

Fez Man's eyes narrowed. "American?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Where are you going?"

Once again, she didn't want to say anything about the medicine and the possible GRE drop at the park. "What is this, Customs and Immigration? I want to go to City Square. I'm looking for my brother. He's lost."

"Lost? He's probably dead." The man's bluntness held no room for sympathy. "Or he's one of *them*."

Mel stared at him and finally replied, "You're probably right, but I have to go anyway.

May I go through?"

"The City Square is very dangerous. Infected are all around there."

"I know. I don't care. I have to look or I'll never forgive myself."

"You won't have to forgive yourself, because you'll be dead or one of them, too."

She felt herself becoming angry. The rage was a tiny ball of fire in her chest that Mel knew would grow as she pondered the ridiculousness of the man's questions and the audacity of blocking off the street.

"What's going on here?" she asked.

Fez Man studied her a moment and shrugged. "We are Harran police. Survivors. We still do our job even if we don't get paid now and our city is dying. We succeeded in moving these cars and the bus yesterday. Now we can pick off any Infected that try to walk through. It's our way of, as you say, Immigration control." He smiled at his cleverness. "There are a lot of un-infected living on this block, hiding in the buildings. They are our families. This is *our* block. We make sure everyone is safe here."

"By shooting anyone who appears? What about innocent un-infected people, like me? You almost killed me!"

"These are harsh times. They call for harsh measures. Why let them live? It is an act of mercy. We monitor the street only during the day. We can't do anything about it at night, though. It's too dangerous. We go inside and make sure *they* can't get in. "

More people—men, women, and two children—emerged from the buildings to her left and right. Was this the entire enclave? Mel couldn't help but notice two girls who were about her own age. "Hi," one of them said.

The bully shushed her just as a grey-haired man, also wearing a caftan and a fez, joined

the group at the "gate." He walked with a cane. From the way everyone deferred to him, Mel figured he was the true leader.

"I am Ismet," he said in English.

Despite her irritation, Mel tried to be as friendly as possible. "Hello. I knew there would be pockets of un-infected survivors here and there. I'm happy to see you alive. How many are you?"

"Nineteen."

An older woman wearing a headscarf joined Ismet and eyed Mel's windbreaker sleeves suspiciously. She spoke Arabic to Ismet and he nodded.

"Why are you wearing a jacket in this heat?" the man asked.

Uh oh. "It gets cold at night. I just—I just keep wearing it, I guess."

"The sleeve is torn there. Is that blood?"

"Yeah, I cut myself on a fence."

"Could you please take it off?"

A sudden tension gripped the band of survivors. The woman—probably Ismet's wife—spat some harsh-sounding words.

"I don't have to do that," Mel replied, but she couldn't keep the nervousness out of her voice.

"Are you bitten?" Ismet asked.

"I already answered that."

The woman said something sharply in her tongue. Some of the others murmured in response. Mel didn't need a translation. It was obvious the woman thought she'd been bitten.

"I am not bitten!" Mel insisted again.

"Then take off your jacket," Ismet ordered. "Let us see your arms. We'd like you to roll up your pants legs and show us your calves."

Mel's frustration and anger exploded. "*No*! What's wrong with you people? I just want to go through your goddamned gate and continue on my way. I won't bother you again!"

Several guns leveled and pointed at her.

"Kill her!" the woman shouted, surprisingly in English. "She is bitten! Shoot her!"

One of the men reached out and attempted to remove the jacket, but Mel whirled around, ready to strike him with the bat. The gunmen prepared to fire—and Ismet held up his hand and made a command in Arabic. Time froze and everyone stood as still as statues.

Mel looked at Ismet and pleaded, "Look, please just let me go. I haven't turned. Don't shoot me. Give me... a chance. Please." She looked at the two girls who were her age. The expressions on their faces had changed from welcoming to mistrustful.

"I have some bread," Mel said. "You can have it, just let me go." She dug into her backpack, pulled out the remaining piece of moldy food, and held it out.

Ismet's wife spoke to him again in their language. She was intent on putting Mel down, but the leader replied to her with a softer voice. He then turned to his men and barked another order. They all lowered the guns but remained alert. Ismet beckoned Mel with his hand to follow him. She did so and he led her through the opening to the other side of the barrier.

"There," he said. "You are free to go. Good luck. *Don't come back*."

She nodded at him and said, "Thank you."

A gunshot startled all of them. Mel whirled around to see that one of the men had shot an Infected who had appeared on the road.

"Go now," Ismet said to her, "before more of them come. The sound of gunfire attracts

them.” He then reached out, took the piece of moldy bread that was still in her hand, and turned his back.

Shaken and angry, Mel walked forward, staying the course as the small group of survivors watched her progress until she was a mere dot in the distance.

8

2:00pm.

Mel could smell Harran Stadium a block away.

The amount of Infected walking the street increased exponentially the closer she got. She was forced to move ahead more slowly, staying behind cover for longer periods of time in order to avoid being seen. She crept along the storefronts on the south side of Nightmare Row; the stadium was just ahead on the right. It took up an entire block. The nearer to the abattoir she got, the worse the scene of carnage became.

Besides Infected lolling about, corpses dotted the street. Either Infected had fed on them, or birds or other animals had. Mel attempted to keep her focus off the bodies and stay more attuned to what the Infected were doing. Crossing the intersection and entering the stadium grounds were going to be extremely dangerous. She remembered there was an inadequate parking lot on her side of the arena, but that was still a lot of wide open space. Should she head down a side street and work her way around the landmark? The problem with that was she would surely get lost. Those back alleys and roads—the medina—were maze-like, and she figured navigating them would be even more hazardous.

Luckily, the Infected tended to stay more in the middle of the road. Mel just had to be particularly careful, making sure every stopping point provided plenty of cover and every movement was either so slow it wouldn't be noticed, or so fast that she reached where she was going before they spotted her.

Mel remembered walking to the stadium on those few days before the Games. She preferred it to taking the shuttle bus from the hotel. The landmark itself was an open-air, bowl-

style arena, large enough to host soccer matches and other big events. Mostly made of bricks, the stands held 25,000 souls, and the bowels of the building contained a concourse featuring concessions and rest rooms, dressing rooms for the athletes, and stables for animals.

Finally, she reached the end of the block and was able to slip into the structure to her right. It was a bank that had been broken into and vandalized. Three corpses lay on the floor inside and a million flies buzzed around them, but no Infected in sight. What she was most interested in was the ground floor window overlooking the stadium. She wanted to see the lay of the land before proceeding.

The view was a good one. The parking lot, still full of cars, was just across the intersection. Many of the vehicles had been vandalized. Abandoned wrecks littered the road that ran along the stadium. Several of them were Harran police cars. One lay on its side and was blackened from being burned.

But that was nothing. It was everything else that made her gasp aloud and say a prayer. Gazing at the tableau in broad, bright daylight made the brutal reality of what happened two weeks earlier even more shocking than she could have imagined. Her legs went weak at the horror and her heart rate jumped.

A few Infected rambled through the rows of parked vehicles in the lot, but the bulk of the monsters was concentrated just beyond, on the street and the pavement surrounding the stadium, which loomed large and foreboding in front of her. She didn't try to count them, for Mel was more distressed by the magnitude of bloody, rotten, dead bodies lying on the ground. Everywhere. It was a mass morgue on the street and sidewalk. Some remains looked fresher than others. Most had been fed upon, by either Infected or animals. Flesh-eating birds had taken over whatever the Infected left, and they were all over the site as well, cawing and screeching in

delight. Some corpses had been dragged, presumably by Infected, from one spot to another, leaving behind dried, smeared blood trails and sometimes body parts.

My God, my God.

She guessed that she was looking at as many as two hundred cadavers, all haphazardly displayed and laid out for the elements to claim. This time the urge to vomit was not a symptom of the disease, but rather normal, human revulsion of the scene from hell before her.

And I was there that night.

Tears filled her eyes when she saw the two dead horses lying near one of the stadium gates. Beautiful, white stallions, now bloody red. PIOT had borrowed twenty magnificent animals from a famous Spanish riding school in Europe for the Games' opening ceremony. Mel had ridden one of them. The horses, too, had been D-Day victims; they were now carcasses with exposed trunks, the entrails of which had been pulled out by scavengers.

Mel put her head in her hands and openly wept as the memories flooded back.

*

Her horse's name was Apollo. She loved him and thought he was a magnificent creature. She and the animal took to each other in a matter of minutes. They had no trouble bonding.

Two one-hour rehearsals for Tuesday evening's opening ceremony had been scheduled during the days before the Games started. As PIOT had requested athletes who could ride horses, Mel was given a prime position in the grand procession that would be the highlight of the show.

The first half hour of practice on Sunday was for riders and horses to get to know each other. Mel rode Apollo around the stadium's field at a trot, and then slowly nudged the white stallion into a gallop. The boy from Hungary, Jakub, seemed to be having trouble with his horse,

whose name was Oberon. Mel didn't much care for Jakub. He had come on way too strongly to her when they met on Monday. Although he was very fit and not unattractive, he wasn't her type and he was rude and crude. Jakub was just like some of the jocks back home—he had an overbearing sense of entitlement.

So it was with some pleasure that Mel watched Oberon let Jakub know who was boss in their relationship. The poor boy couldn't get the horse to obey the simplest commands. Instead, Oberon threw his unwanted rider off his back. When Jakub rose, unhurt except for his pride, everyone laughed.

Lucy, Mel's new friend and fellow athlete from England, rode her horse up next to Mel and said, "That boy told the organizers he was great with horses."

"He's made it pretty clear that he thinks he's great with the ladies, too," Mel said.

Lucy laughed, "Did he have a line for you, too?"

"Uh huh. He said, 'What's a nice American girl doing in a place like this?' I was really impressed by its originality."

They watched as a handler assisted Jakub back on the horse for another try. Oberon reluctantly obeyed, but probably more as a favor for his trainer than for his rider.

"I think Jean-Pierre is sweet on you," Mel said, referring to one of the other athletes.

"Yeah, is it obvious?"

"You like him, too, huh? I don't blame you, he's pretty hot."

"He's French, though. Aren't we supposed to be natural enemies?"

"Oh, come on, wasn't that, like, hundreds of years ago?"

The two girls eased their mares into an easy trot so they could talk as they went around the field again. "I still can't believe what happened last night in Old Town," Lucy said.

"Wasn't that awful? I was afraid I'd have nightmares."

"Did they catch that crazy guy?"

"I have no idea. The papers here are in Arabic."

"There's an English paper. You can get it in the hotel lobby."

"I haven't noticed. Did it say anything about what happened?'

"No. You'd think if a crazy guy kills someone in the street in front of visiting tourists, you'd hear about it."

"You think?"

"I don't know, maybe they'd already printed the paper before it happened."

They were silent for a few moments until Lucy said, "I was talking to Ali about it. You know, the concierge?"

"Yeah?"

"He said it's not the first time something like that has happened in Harran."

"Really?"

"He told me that recently there have been similar incidents, just in the past couple of weeks, of someone going mad and attacking other people."

"Are you serious?"

"I am. Ali thinks the government is trying to keep it quiet. Maybe that's why what happened last night isn't in the news."

"Were those other attacks like the one we saw? Were people killed?" Mel asked.

"I think so. Ali said there was a murder real close to the stadium. It happened a few days ago. Some guy went berserk and killed three people in the street. The police shot him."

"Jesus."

"Yeah, I'm not too anxious to get out and tour Harran anymore. And you've seen Ali, right? Big, strong, strapping young man? I swear he was *scared* when he told me about what's been going on. He's heard things. Said there have been some disappearances. You know, people have gone missing. I asked him if there was anything to worry about, and you know what he said?"

"What?"

"Nothing. The hotel manager came up to us and told him to do something. But as he walked away from me, he turned back, met my eyes, and nodded with an emphatic *yes*." With that, Lucy kicked her horse and galloped away, leaving Mel to reflect on what she'd just learned.

Nevertheless, the Tuesday night opening ceremony went off without a hitch. Even Jakub had finally managed to tame his horse and get the stubborn mare to cooperate. Twenty athletes rode the white stallions in the procession, followed by the other competitors, who marched and waved at the crowd. Instead of wearing clothing that represented the athletes' home country, they were all adorned in the same uniform supplied by PIOT. That way, each athlete symbolized the worldwide fraternity of "Youth for Peace." The procession was set to music piped through the speaker system—a John Philip Sousa march, the name of which Mel couldn't recall. As she rode around the field, she had a good idea where in the stands her parents and brother were sitting, but the lights were too bright for her to see them. The applause was thunderous, and it was all very exciting.

Later, in the women's dressing room, Lucy was in a hurry to get out of costume and leave the stadium.

"What's the rush?" Mel asked.

"Jean-Pierre and I are going out."

"Ah. Hot date?"

Lucy wiggled her eyebrows. "I hope so."

"Where are you going?"

"Jean-Pierre heard about a fabulous restaurant that serves Turkish cuisine in Old Town. We're going there."

"Well, have fun. I guess I'll be going back to Hotel Harran to have a late dinner with the parents and the little brother." Mel figured that apparently Lucy had forgotten her qualms of exploring Harran at night.

The call to be at the stadium the next morning was seven-thirty. Mel walked the several blocks from the hotel to the arena and went to the dressing room as instructed. Everyone was there—except Lucy and Jean-Pierre. The handler who worked with Mel asked if she knew where they were. Apparently, they hadn't return to Hotel Harran the night before. Concerned, Mel tried to call Lucy on her mobile phone, but there was no answer. The voice mail kicked in, and Lucy's cheery voice said, "I can't answer the phone right now! Leave a message!"

Beep.

For the rest of the week, after the Games had begun, the athletes shared stories they'd been hearing about violence in the city. Someone had brought in the English-language newspaper; buried in the middle was a report about several missing persons that "the President and Chief of Police were doing nothing about." One athlete from Russia told a story similar to what Mel and her family had witnessed in Old Town on the second night of the Games—a berserk person had killed someone on the street in front of witnesses. This had occurred in City Square, a park not far from the stadium. A Japanese athlete claimed that a group of six or seven "crazy people" attacked a souq in the medina and more than twenty people were killed. That

comment was met with some skepticism. "Surely the news would be all over that one," Jakub proclaimed. "I think you're letting these stories feed your imagination too much."

"Did you see it happen?" Mel asked her.

"No, I just heard about it," the Japanese girl answered.

"See?" Jakub scoffed. "Rumors. Just silly rumors."

That night, Mel overheard her father express concern to her mother. Bad things were happening in Harran. Should they leave? So-and-so's entire family took the first plane out. No, they had to see their daughter compete.

By Saturday morning, the day of the climactic parkour race that would take place in the evening, many visitors had indeed left. There was still a massive throng of people in the stands for the games that day, but a sizable portion was gone. The athletes were on edge, too. The word in the dressing room was that the citizens of Harran were frightened. The rumors and second-hand stories of even more murders in the city had spooked everyone. Some believed that violent gangs were targeting innocent people, just for the fun of it. Others speculated that it was a terrorist plot. Everyone had a theory.

Everyone was wrong.

*

A noise behind Mel jolted her from her recollections. She whirled from the bank window to behold two Infected stumbling toward her.

9

4:00pm.

Mel swung the bat at the creatures to discourage them, and then she bolted out the bank's front door. The Infected followed her out to the street, growling and hollering in their inhuman way. This only served to attract other Infected; at least ten of them were in the immediate vicinity. Mel had no alternative but to run blindly across the intersection and rush toward the stadium. Her parkour ability came in handy as she used a wrecked sedan as a ramp by sprinting onto the hood, over the top, and down the trunk to evade the closest Infected. She headed for the parking lot, figuring she would have much better luck amongst the cover of all the parked vehicles. Several of the monsters meandered in the rows, but at least their heads and shoulders could be seen.

She shot between the cars as the Infected's screeches became the equivalent of alarms for all the others in sight. Dozens focused on Mel and advanced her way. Two Infected appeared in the row in which Mel was running, so she leaped on the hood of a car and repeated the up-and-over parkour maneuver she had performed earlier. From there she jumped to the next vehicle and did it again, finally landing on the pavement of the adjacent aisle. It was a revelation—she could outrun and certainly out-jump the slow-moving predators by propelling herself across the parking lot in that pattern—bolt over a car, jump to another one, hop down to the pavement, up to a car, leap for another one, shoot down to the pavement—and so on until she reached the end of the lot.

And that's where it got really hairy. With all the corpses on the ground and the Infected coming for her, there was no way she was going to be able to skirt around the arena without

being ambushed.

Mel frantically scanned the area for an escape route and realized there was only one—she had to enter the stadium and go through it to get to the other side.

She ran into a gate, leaped over bodies covering the walkway, and found herself in the concourse, the area beneath the stands that circled the arena and contained concession stands, restrooms, and other amenities. It, too, was littered with bodies. As it was an enclosed space without air conditioning, the stench was overpowering. Corpses had been lying there for two weeks and had bloated and spoiled so badly that they were unrecognizable as human beings. Many had inflated beyond the size of their clothing and torn through it, exposing purple, rotting flesh. Mel gagged and thought she would vomit again; she leaned against the concrete wall, closed her eyes, and covered her mouth with her hand and breathed through it until the sensation subsided. The momentary pause was costly, though, for Infected entered the gate behind her, still howling their alien alerts. Mel sped on past a food stand decorated with the bodies of policemen whose ripped-open torsos revealed blackened cavities. Her plan was to run around half the length of the concourse to the other side of the stadium and exit through one of the northern-most gates, but Infected appeared in the bend in front of her; she was trapped in-between groups of the slavering, jaw-snapping monsters. Now frantic, Mel eyed the stairs leading to a section of seats above; perhaps she could stick to the same plan of moving around the arena's circumference, but instead by way of the stands in the open air.

When she reached the top of the stairs, the display of horror was almost too much to bear. *Hundreds* of corpses cluttered the bleachers and the playing field. The turf was awash with dried, sticky blood. More horse carcasses dotted the ground below, as well as Harran military vehicles and police cars. Great numbers of predator birds swarmed over the gruesome scene and

were enjoying the feast of a lifetime. Amidst the carnage, of course, were dozens of living, walking Infected. It was a composition reminiscent of the most nightmarish visions of Hieronymus Bosch or Francis Bacon. Mel was so stunned by the hellish vista that her legs gave out. She stumbled over a bench and fell on a distended, mushy corpse. Mel screamed—absolutely the worst thing she could have done—and rolled off the disgusting thing. Cursing herself, she stood and observed that nearly every Infected in the entire stadium had heard her cry and were now storming toward her at their slow but ever-threatening pace.

Thus began another reliance on her skills as a parkour runner. Mel proceeded to scamper up and down the benches in the stands, zigzagging in all directions to avoid Infected and obstructions of cadavers. *Step on a riser here and then leap to the next one above it. Jaunt across the bench to the end, high-jump over the rail to the next section, land on a bench, and navigate a new course from there. Repeatedly.* The noise of the cawing birds and screeching Infected created a cacophony of terror, an unholy soundtrack to her journey over the obstacle course.

She made it a quarter of the way around the arena, which meant she had only another fourth to go. It was at this point, as she bounded over the body of a man, Mel heard a voice cry, "Help… me… help…me…" She halted and turned to behold the bloody and dirty man reaching for her. He was alive! Daring to hamper her progress, Mel went to him. "Please… water… help…" he whispered, his bloodshot eyes pleading for her assistance. He was an adult, maybe in his fifties—but it was difficult to say for certain. The pathetic casualty lay in his own blood and vomit, and bite marks were visible on his arms and neck.

The poor guy is a lost cause.

Nevertheless, Mel reached into the backpack and pulled out the nearly-empty water bottle

since she still had an unopened one.

"Here."

The man hungrily clutched the bottle and gulped the remaining vestiges of liquid.

"When were you bit?" she asked.

He shook his head and attempted to answer her, but his body suddenly jerked violently. Red bile spewed from his throat as he coughed and convulsed.

Oh my God, he's turning!

The man bellowed in pain as his entire form writhed. Mel backed away but she couldn't take her eyes off of him. After nearly a minute, the victim just as abruptly went limp. Was he unconscious? Was he dead? Too curious for her own good, Mel slowly crept closer to see what had happened.

His hand grabbed her ankle and he slithered forward on the cement floor, his jaws snapping maniacally. Mel shrieked and slammed the baseball bat hard on his arm. He let go and she backed away in dismay. She stood there, frozen, as the brand new Infected struggled to his feet. His eyes had transformed to the golden yellow common to all Infected. He staggered toward her, his broken arm stretched forward in a feeble attempt to catch her. Mel snapped out of her momentary shock, swung the bat again, and struck him on the side of his shoulder. As he fell, she turned and continued her dash around the stadium.

More leaping and climbing, descending and vaulting. The ordeal seemed to never end. At times an Infected drew too close, so she had to stop and attack it with her weapon. By the time she reached the northern end of the arena, Mel was out of breath and her entire body was in agony. She scurried down the stairs to the concourse and encountered more Infected feeding on corpses. They looked up, growled, and stood, their mouths smeared with bits of human flesh and

blood. Mel successfully sidestepped them and pushed herself to keep going to the closest gate ramp. Down she went—and she was finally out of the structure on street level. That side of the stadium was just as littered with bodies as the southern end. More Infected spotted her and lumbered after the moving target, but they were way too slow to catch the athlete as she crossed the intersection, made it to the next block, and ducked into a dilapidated coffee shop to hide and catch her breath. It appeared that luck was on her side. Squatting behind the counter, she discovered an open trap door in the floor that revealed stairs descending to a storage basement. She gave the space a quick scan to make sure no adversaries were there, and then she scuttled down, pulled the trap closed over her head, and huddled in the dark to rest.

It seemed to take forever for her heart rate to slow, but eventually, after concentrated breathing, it did. She opened the second water bottle and took a long, necessary drink.

She closed her eyes and was gone for the next half-hour.

10

6:00pm.

The sun was going down. Although it was still light outside, it wouldn't be long before darkness covered the city and the danger increased ten-fold. The street lamps along Nightmare Row were inadequate; they barely illuminated six-foot-diameter spaces around them. Even if there were survivors in buildings along the way, no one would turn on a light for fear of attracting the zombies. Mel knew that Infected gained strength and speed at night. What should she do? Find a place to hide until morning? It's what any sane person would do, but for her it was a terrible idea; she might as well take the revolver and shoot herself now. With every passing minute, her turning became more inevitable. She *had* to keep moving.

There were definitely more Infected out and they were already displaying signs of augmented abilities. Should she try running now? No—there was simply too many of them on the road now. She might be able to outrun them, but Infected ahead of her would see her and form a mass to stop her. Mel was forced to keep creeping ever so slowly along the road, hiding behind garbage, abandoned vehicles, and other points of cover. She figured at the rate she was going, she'd make it to City Square in a year. Was she on a ridiculously hopeless mission? Was she out of her mind? Should she just give up and end it all, here and now?

The frikkin' medicine.

She had to get the medicine. But was it coming? Was it all a pipe dream? If only she could know for certain. It had to be true. All this effort mustn't be for naught!

Keep going, damn it. Don't give up now. You got past a major obstacle. You're not going to let the dark scare you or impede you. You will reach the park or die trying.

She squatted behind a small van as several Infected trudged near her in the middle of the boulevard. Inexplicably, she suddenly thought about her parents. How horrible it was for them to die the way they did. And Paul… poor, helpless Paul. She hated to admit it, but if she were a betting woman, she'd place all of her chips on Paul being dead. Mel hoped it wasn't true, but her common sense told her otherwise.

The Infected had moved on, so it was time to keep going. Mel darted to a storefront alcove and stopped, looked, and then dashed to another parked car. But as she scampered to the cover of a demolished fruit stand, she nearly tripped over another living being, a woman wearing a headscarf, lying on the ground.

The surprise encounter caused Mel to gasp and jerk backwards as if she had almost stepped on a rattlesnake. The woman reacted to the sound, gazed at Mel, and snarled like a cornered wildcat. She reached out with a gnarled hand and then *screamed* like a banshee. The horrid noise alerted other Infected, and Mel saw several of them turn and move toward her hiding place. Mel didn't even think about it—the baseball bat slammed down on the woman's head. The wounded creature ceased shrieking, which allowed the athlete to get a better look at her opponent. She was a Harran citizen, maybe in her forties. Dried blood was smeared over one side of her face and her clothing was a mess. A massive dark red splotch covered the front of her dress and one leg was horribly mangled; she had either been bludgeoned or shot and was now immobile. Her eyes were golden. Infected.

The athlete leaped over the body and ran like the dickens.

The Infected weren't lumbering after her in slow motion anymore—they were walking *fast*. Not quite running, but almost. It was what she'd feared. She had to get off the road. Luckily, she spied a break in-between two buildings ahead and slipped between them. It was a

claustrophobic, narrow passageway that led to another street behind and parallel to Nightmare Row. Mel was now in the rear of the buildings that faced the major boulevard. The structures were two to four stories high on either side, creating a canyon-like effect that made illumination even dimmer.

Crap, the sunglasses!

She ripped them off and stuck them in her jacket pocket. Much better. However, there were two male Infected *trotting* toward her. Not wishing to retrace her steps or run the opposite direction, Mel stood her ground, raised the bat, and prepared for battle. The Infected reached her quickly and she started swinging. The bat struck one man and knocked him down, but that also provided the other one with the opportunity to grab hold of Mel's arms. He growled ferociously, his teeth snapped repeatedly, and he tried to move his head in to get at a piece of her flesh. Mel screamed and fought for her life, struggling to keep the Infected away by blocking him with the bat and her own arms. The guy was *strong*!

And then she felt a sharp, intense pain in her left leg.

The man on the ground had not been disabled. He had simply crawled forward and bitten her through her jeans. The terror of the moment must have caused Mel's adrenaline to surge, for she somehow found the strength to push the standing Infected away and then sling the bat down on the biter's head. A sickening *crunch* indicated that she had crushed the guy's skull, but she was left with a mauled calf and the other man. Now she *had* to retreat. Mel turned and started to run away from the Infected, but the creature *tackled* her. She kicked and screamed and fought and struggled—anything to keep the monster from holding on to either leg. Her shoes pummeling his face provided scant defense, for the Infected wasn't giving up easily. The bat somehow flew from her hands, but she didn't notice. By then she was punching and kicking

with every limb until the creature let go. Instinct prevailed over rationality—Mel got to her feet and ran without taking the time to retrieve the weapon. Her leg hurt like hell but she ignored it. Getting away was the priority.

She could make out an open back door of a building just up ahead. It was the best option for her, so she shot inside, slammed the door shut, and threw a bolt. The Infected banged on the other side of the door, howling his frustration at not catching his prey. Mel backed up in a dark hallway, circled to get her bearings, and tried to figure out where she was. The place appeared to be a utility room that contained water heaters and furnaces. She carefully went through another door, entered another corridor that was eerily quiet, and followed it to the front of the building. She noted mailboxes attached to the wall next to a larger door that she reckoned faced Nightmare Row, and figured she was in an apartment building.

A staircase led to the second floor, so she climbed it. Sure enough, several closed doors with numbers on them lined the hallway there. She took a moment to examine her leg and saw that it was bleeding profusely. She had left a trail of blood all the way up the stairs.

To hell with it. Find a place to wash it off.

She climbed to a higher floor and tried the doors. All locked. One more flight. On the fourth level, there were five locked apartment doors and one that had a piece of paper taped to the front. Mel approached it and saw that that someone had scribbled words in Arabic and English.

TO ANYONE WHO HAS SURVIVED, WE ARE IN OUR BEDROOM.

Mel tried the door and found it unlocked. She carefully crept inside and stood in the dark entryway of a small living room decorated in Islamic accoutrement. She recognized the funky smell of death and heard the familiar sound of buzzing flies. Mel reckoned she could handle

hiding with some corpses as long as no Infected were in there with her. She stood quietly and listened for any other sounds in the apartment.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

Should she find the bedroom? First she stepped to an open window in the living room and looked outside. It faced Nightmare Row. Dusk was enveloping Harran. Down below the Infected swarmed like insects, moving in all directions and—*communicating?*—making their awful throaty noises.

She followed the room to a small kitchen. Off to the side was a small dining table covered in cloth. Mel opened the refrigerator; it was no longer cold, but it was stocked with eggs, fruit, and milk. The latter had soured and the eggs had gone bad, but some figs looked all right. She removed and set them on a counter, and then continued to explore.

The single bedroom door was closed.

"Hello?" She knocked.

Silence.

What the hell…

She opened the door and took in the setting. The room held a queen-sized bed upon which a deceased elderly couple lay. The man wore some kind of military uniform—Harran military, perhaps? The woman had on a headscarf. They were holding hands. Mel saw no signs of violence; and aside from the obvious bloating and putrid stench of death, the couple appeared unharmed. She went to the nightstand and discovered two glasses containing tiny amounts of water and an empty prescription pill bottle. The label on it was written in Arabic, but Mel could guess what had been inside.

The couple had gone ahead and done what *she* had threatened to do. Too bad there were no more pills. That would certainly be a better way to go than putting a bullet in her head.

She left the bedroom and shut the door. Then she found the bathroom and rolled up her pants leg. The bite was ugly but starting to coagulate. Thank goodness there was still running water. She turned on the faucet, found a washcloth and cleaned herself up. The medicine cabinet held bandages and something that appeared to be an antiseptic ointment. No other pills, though. Mel applied the salve and covered the wounds on her leg and arm with the bandages. Not that this would do any good.

She stared at the frightened, desperate face in the mirror and wondered—*now that she had two bites, would she turn faster?*

11

7:30pm.

Mel returned to the kitchen a bit shell-shocked. She was exhausted, hungry, and thirsty. Normally she would have avoided drinking water out of the tap in a foreign country, but she figured—*what the hell? How could getting sick from that be any worse than turning into a frikkin' zombie*? After drinking the water in her one bottle, she topped it off from the sink. She ate the figs and then began to feel nauseated again. She lay down on a short sofa in the living room and closed her eyes, hoping it would pass so she wouldn't have to consider shooting herself again.

She thought about Ismet and the block where the group of survivors had set up the barrier of cars. Were there more pockets of uninfected people in the city? Surely there were. Did they know about the medicine? What if it had been dropped during the day and she'd missed it? And if not, would the drop be tomorrow? Mel clearly recalled the announcement she had heard on Emil's radio.

"The GRE—the Global Relief Effort—will be sending a hastily prepared vaccination within two or three days. It will be air-dropped, along with food and water for the uninfected survivors of the disaster. Several drop points have been chosen on the basis of populated areas and convenience."

Mel had been standing with other Guard members in the Harran Hotel lobby. Someone wrote down the drop points as they were named. Ali, the concierge, confirmed that the closest one was City Square. It would be up to the people on the ground to retrieve the supplies.

"Doctors have been working feverishly day and night in order to create a cure for the

epidemic that has struck the city-state of Harran. In the meantime, it was deemed essential by Harran's Ministry of Defense that the city-state be quarantined until further notice."

What Mel didn't understand was why they weren't letting out people who hadn't been infected. It didn't make sense. Wouldn't they want to save any survivors? From what she'd learned from her colleagues at the hotel, she knew all the ways out of the city were blocked. But they must have gotten hold of an infected person, otherwise how did they come up with medicine? Mel didn't understand much about how the disease worked except from what she'd seen with her own eyes. Every victim behaved pretty much the same, but the amount of time it took for someone who was bitten to turn were vastly different. Another big question was how the disease might progress in an infected person. What would the afflicted be like in another couple of weeks? A month? A year? Was the disease eventually fatal? The disaster at the Games obviously wasn't the beginning—people had been sick prior to that. How long had the virus been in existence in Harran? Had the government really covered it up? It was insane. They allowed thousands of people from around the world to visit the place while a deadly epidemic was spreading.

Living at the hotel for the two weeks after D-Day had been pure agony, but to ease the frustration and boredom, Mel had volunteered to be a part of the ad-hoc Guard that was made up mostly of the athletes who had been staying there. No one had real weapons—just improvised clubs and spears fashioned by attaching kitchen knives to sticks. Sefu, an athlete from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and regarded as something of a firebug, had created Molotov cocktails by using gasoline siphoned from some of the abandoned cars outside on the street. How he gained that knowledge, Mel didn't ask.

"It's easy to do," the African boy told her. "You can use petrol, or any flammable liquid,

really. Turpentine, methanol, diesel fuel." He showed her how to take an empty bottle, fill it with the incendiary material, and then plug it with a cork or even clay model putty. "Don't use a rubber stopper, that will disintegrate," he said. A fuse or wick was made by stuffing a piece of cloth into the bottle and held in place by the stopper. "Dip the cloth in kerosene or alcohol, or even more petrol. Light it, throw it, and... boom! If you really want to do some damage, mix into the petrol some kind of thickening agent, such as baking soda, or motor oil, or rubber cement—even dish soap—and that causes the flaming petrol to stick to the target!"

There were twelve members of the Guard to begin with. By the time Mel decided to volunteer, there were only nine. One athlete had been bitten and two simply disappeared while on patrol. Emil gave her the baseball bat. Every day a group of five or six went out the blockaded front doors and circled the hotel. Mel never went with the small group that dared to venture beyond the immediate surroundings. Jakub once accused of being "chicken," but she told him, "*I'd rather be a live chicken than one on an Infected's dinner plate."*

*

It was the beginning of the second week of being stuck in Hotel Harran. Mel assured Paul she would be all right and left Suite 420 to participate in her first day on the job.

Emil asked, "All right, who's going out on patrol today?" He was the ad hoc leader of the Guard. Mel respected his authority, although the young man had a difficult time controlling the team. Every member had an opinion about something and picked and chose which of the rules that were set up to follow, such as not to engage an Infected if you didn't have to. Jaroslav, a boy from the Czech Republic, was more or less second-in-command.

Jakub, Sefu, Jaroslav, and a Japanese girl named Reiko all raised their hands. Mel, who was new to the Guard, raised hers as well.

"Ah, the virgin Guard raises her hand!" Jakub taunted with a laugh. "Are you sure you want to do this, Melanie? You might mess up your pretty blonde hair."

"Shut it, Jakub," Emil snapped. "Mel, you stick with me. As long as you're alert and don't do anything stupid, you'll be fine. Now, as you know, Infected have been trying to get inside the hotel at night. Not only do they get stronger and faster after the sun goes down, but I think they get smarter, too. Two days ago we discovered that the loading dock door had a hole in it. We don't know how it got there, but we plugged it up. Last week we found a broken window to a fire escape on the second floor. If the Infected are climbing fire escapes and breaking windows, we're in trouble. So as you go around the building, scan all the way up and down the sides."

Sefu said, "If those bastards get in the hotel, we're dead. If that happens..." He shrugged. "Well, I'd just set fire to the building and destroy it all."

"Didn't your mama tell you not to play with matches?" Jakub teased.

Sefu shrugged. "If we're gonna die, we might as well take some of them with us."

Emil nodded at Jakub and Jaroslav. "All right, you two, why don't you go east into the medina and see what you can find. We're short on milk and cereals. Fruit would be nice. Don't go any farther than three blocks. Understood?"

Jakub muttered, "Yes, boss."

"And keep any talking down to a whisper. Noise attracts those bastards. All right, suit up."

That meant the Guard taped thick pieces of cardboard on their arms and legs. That wouldn't stop a bullet, but it provided some protection against bites. Mel affixed separate strips to her forearms and upper arms so that she could still bend her elbows. Everyone was armed

with clubs and bats. Sefu had three Molotov cocktails he had prepared earlier.

"Ready to do this?" the leader asked. Everyone nodded.

Jakub asked, "Are we not going to huddle, put our hands in the middle, and say 'Go team go'?"

Emil ignored him and gave the signal for the remaining Guards to push back the barricades and unlock the front doors. The original glass doors, in the center of the front of the building, were still covered from the inside with heavy furniture and machinery. It took several strong guys to move it out of the way, a ritual they performed only once a day. The six athletes marched out into the hot sun and donned sunglasses. Nightmare Row was deserted. Gone were the sounds of the busy metropolis—automobiles, horns honking, and the dull roar of humanity. Missing were the bicycles ridden by fez, turban, or headscarf-wearing Harranites. The occasional animals herded or ridden by citizens—horses, mules, pigs, camels, goats—were just a memory. Even stray dogs and cats, normally seen everywhere in Harran, couldn't be found. The birds, however, remained. Aside from the breeze, birds made the only outdoor noises the Guard could hear.

What hadn't been in the street prior to D-Day were the dozen or so bodies lying in front of the hotel and in the road. Some had been there for a week.

"It's so quiet out here," Mel whispered.

"Yeah," Emil said. "Quite different from last week, huh?"

"It's creepy."

Emil led the way south in front of the hotel. Mel stuck beside him, her eyes darting all around for any sign of movement. Jakub and Jaroslav crossed the road to the other side, heading toward one of the side streets. Sefu and Reiko went north in front of the building; they would

meet Emil and Mel mid-way in the rear, and then all four would return to the entrance.

Mel and Emil made it all the way around to the back and stopped at the loading dock. Emil scrutinized the repair job on the hole in the automatic steel roll-up door. Someone had drilled holes in it so that thick plywood could be bolted on. As a result, the door could never be raised, but at least it kept out the zombies.

"How'd they make that hole?" Mel asked.

"I'm not sure. Looks like a cannon ball hit it, doesn't it? Actually, I think it might have been done by *un*infected. There are some healthy people out here who are not very friendly."

"Why? What do they want?"

"The same things we want. Food, supplies, weapons. Girls." He looked at Mel, grinned, and shrugged, indicating the latter was just a fact of life. "They're gangs. We think they're from the Slums part of town and are run by bad men who were criminals to begin with. They've probably set up a black market of goods, most likely taken from other survivors."

Reiko and Sefu approached from the opposite side of the building. "All clear over here," Sefu announced at a low voice.

"Let's go back," Emil said. The foursome then set about on the return journey via the south side. When they reached the road, though, they found that a cluster of nine Infected was moving toward the broken glass doors of the building. It was an occurrence that happened at least twice a day and more frequently at night. The monsters would push and bang on the obstacles through the shattered glass, scream and snarl, and try desperately to get at the dinners walking around inside the hotel. They didn't have the wherewithal to try and move the barriers, so they'd stand out there, frustrated and hungry. Eventually, though, they would forget about it and move on.

Sefu whispered, “What do you say, Emil? This is our chance to get some payback.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to engage them unless we had to,” Reiko reminded her African colleague.

Emil frowned and exhaled. “I think we have to. They’re between us and the damn entrance.”

“They also outnumber us. Where are Jakub and Jaroslav?” Mel asked.

“Not back yet, apparently.”

One of the Infected screeched and started lumbering in their direction.

“Shit, they know we’re here,” Emil said. “Come on, we have to fight. You ready, Mel?”

The young woman had never been more frightened. “Oh my God. I didn’t expect this on my first watch.”

“Just don’t be afraid to use that bat. On three...”

Emil counted down and the foursome rushed the twenty yards from the side of the building to confront the walking wounded in front of the doors. By then, all nine Infected were shrieking and tottering their way.

Clubs smashed and bats crashed. Sefu and Emil did most of the heavy lifting, slamming their weapons into the creatures’ heads and taking them down quickly and efficiently. They had had practice. Mel, on the other hand, tentatively struck at a woman that had her golden eyes set on the young athlete. The blows didn’t stop the Infected’s threat.

“Hit her harder!” Emil cried when he noticed what was happening. He would have helped Mel had he not been fighting two much stronger males.

Mel raised the bat again, but the woman got in too close. She grabbed Mel’s arm and bit into the cardboard. Mel screamed in terror, but she finally swung the bat hard enough to knock

the woman off of her. The homemade "armor" had worked. Now the woman was in a rage, boosting her strength and speed. The athlete was so frightened that she couldn't move. Then, she heard familiar war cries as Jakub and Jaroslav came running from across the road. Jakub attacked the woman from behind and viciously beat her until she was a bleeding, lifeless pulp. Mel was repulsed. She thought it was overkill.

"There, I saved your life," Jakub said with a sneer. "You owe me, blondie."

At that point, a larger cabal of Infected appeared from one of the side streets across the road; they were perhaps eighty yards away. Too many for six to fight. As Reiko, Emil, and Jaroslav took on the remaining three Infected still standing at the door, Sefu yelled, "Keep them occupied!"

He removed a Molotov cocktail from a pouch on his belt and held it in his right hand. Holding a cigarette lighter in his left, he lit the rag-fuse until it was ablaze, and then he threw the bottle a good fifty yards toward the Infected. The explosive burst on the pavement and created a small wall of fire. The Infected instinctively moved around it and kept coming. Sefu lit another cocktail and threw it—this time the explosive landed at the feet of some of the Infected. The flames spread quickly and set the clothing on three of them ablaze.

"All right!" Sefu exclaimed. "Bull's-eye!"

All of the original nine Infected were down and the larger group was stalled by the fire.

"Let's get inside!" Emil shouted. He gave the hand signal to a colleague who was watching from inside the hotel. The pieces of the blockade started moving, allowing entry for the six warriors. But as they moved toward the opening, one of the Infected on the ground grabbed Jaroslav's leg. The Czech athlete stumbled and fell, and the creature pounced. They started wrestling on the ground. Mel was the closest; without thinking about it, she raised her bat

and brought it down hard on the Infected. She knew he wasn't dead, for the zombie kept breathing; nevertheless, he was out of action. The man rolled off of Jaroslav and Mel immediately helped the Czech to his feet and away from the zombie. The boy held his neck with his right hand as blood gushed through his fingers.

Jakub pointed. "He bit you!"

"Get me inside!" Jaroslav wailed. The other Guards blocked the way to the door. "Come on, guys! Let me in."

"No, Jaroslav," Sefu said.

Jakub added, "You know we cannot do that, Jaroslav."

The panic on Jaroslav's face was palpable. Mel felt terrible, for she knew what was going to happen.

"Please, Emil, don't do this," Jaroslav pleased. Tears ran down his cheeks. He fell to his knees, dropped his club, and locked his hands together. "Please, don't leave me out here. I beg you!"

"You know the rules," Emil said softly. Jaroslav broke down and reached for Mel's legs. She jerked away from him and joined Emil and the others, but she couldn't help starting to cry, too. Mel *hated* the rule. It was so inhumane.

"For God's sake!" Mel said to the others. "Are we really going to do this?"

"Hell, yes!" Jakub spat. "Why would we make an exception for him?"

"Because he's one of us! He's our friend!"

"He's a dead man!" Jakub snarled.

Emil touched her arm and she backed away with him and went inside the building. She was the last one through the door. She stopped, met Jaroslav's eyes, and saw the face of a

condemned human.

The other volunteers pushed the barriers in place and sealed off the building from the outside for another day.

Mel sat on one of the lobby chairs and let the tears flow freely. Emil moved beside her and said, “There was nothing we could do for him, Mel,” he said. “You know that. In a few hours he would turn and we’d all be in danger. We have to leave him outside.”

She nodded and wiped the wetness from her cheeks. “It’s just so unfair. Why is this happening?”

Jakub walked up to them and pointed at her. “She can’t be in the Guard! Did you see how pathetic she was? She’s too soft. We need someone who is not afraid to kill those assholes.”

“Shut up, Jakub,” Emil said. “That’s up to Mel.” He looked at her and asked, “You sure you want to be in the Guard? There’s no shame if you say no.”

Mel shook her head and said, “No, I’ll do it. I want to. I’m sorry, it was my first time. I just didn’t... I’ll be better next time, I promise.”

“Fine. I know you will.”

“Shit,” Jakub muttered as he walked away.

On the way back to the fourth floor, Mel feared that the survivors were turning into sadistic beasts on their own. Perhaps it would be better if she didn’t participate in the Guard. She’d try one more patrol and see how it went.

12

9:00pm.

Mel awoke on the little sofa in the elderly couple's apartment and cursed herself for falling asleep. The room was darker, so she got up and went to the window. It was full night outside now. The moon was fairly bright, though, and it cast a film of eerie illumination over Nightmare Row below. Infected moved to and fro along the road, but it was difficult to ascertain how many there were. Sighing, Mel crossed to the kitchen and, as she ate another fig, her eyes zoomed in on the two silver candlesticks that sat on the small dining table. They contained half-used candles, and a wand butane lighter sat next to them.

Awesome, she thought as she lit the candles. They wouldn't be as bright from the outside as the electric lights would. Infected were attracted to bright artificial lighting. That was one reason why they always congregated outside Hotel Harran at night, because the survivors insisted on burning electricity. Mel picked up one candlestick and walked with it back to the living room to sit down.

What was she going to do? It made a lot of sense to simply stay in the foul apartment until sunrise, although she hardly noticed the horrible stench anymore. She didn't like the notion that she could get used to the smell of death in only a few hours.

The problem was that she still didn't know how much time she had before the disease worked its way through her system and turned her into one of *them*. Did the progression churn faster with two bites? Truth be told, Mel was surprised it hadn't happened yet. In just a little while, it would be twenty-four hours since she'd received the first chomp on her arm. Could the standard vaccinations she had received as a child be a factor? Measles, smallpox, chicken pox?

Tetanus? Again... maybe it was just that she had good genes. But she couldn't be sure.

You need to leave and brave the elements, girl, she told herself. *Get to the park and find some place to hole up until the GRE drops the frikkin' medicine.* It was her only hope. Finding Paul was a crap shoot; she never really believed he could be located.

Did she have a few more hours of being human? Or would she turn in mere minutes? Mel was certain she didn't have another full day.

As if on cue, a wave of nausea hit her hard in the abdomen. It was so strong that it caused her to bend over and cry out in pain. She dropped off the sofa to her knees but managed to safely place the candlestick on the floor. The room spun and she tried to stand and wobble back to the sofa, but instead she fell face down on the colorful carpet. She had once gotten drunk with some friends in high school. That had been awful; Mel hated the topsy-turvy feeling when she was prone. This was similar, only the pain in her belly was much worse.

Fight it! Come on, don't let it win!

Her vision was bathed in that strange yellow tint again as she battled the sensation of riding a roller coaster at an amusement park.

It will be an adventure! Come on, let's ride it!

Was that a voice talking to her? Mel could've sworn someone was in the room with her. Or was it just a hallucination, a symptom of the disease?

Sure, it's scary, that's the point!

Was she turning? Who's saying that?

You go up really high and you come down really fast!

She cried out in anguish.

No! Fight it! I'm not *on a roller-coaster!*

The queasiness bubbled to a breaking point, and she forced herself to roll up off the carpet, stand, and make her way to the bathroom. It seemed as if the floor was made of cushions and she bumped into the wall and furniture on the way. She made it, though, and dropped to her knees in front of the toilet—a modern one, thank goodness, not like some of the ones she'd seen in Harran that consisted of simply a hole in the floor—and vomited. As a child she hated throwing up, and now wasn't any better. Mel closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to look at the rank bowl, but the stink was so overpowering that it caused her to heave again. She then weakly flushed the commode and collapsed on the tiles, still dizzy. The world bobbed; her impression was that of floating on water.

Oh my God, I'm turning, damn it, I'm turning, oh please God don't let me turn, please, oh make it go away...

And, miraculously, after a little while, it did. The nausea dissipated and the spinning Tilt-a-Whirl slowed to a stop. The yellow filter in her eyes faded. The floor felt cold and foreign—but it was also solid and firm again. No more sensation of lying on an inflatable raft in a swimming pool.

She tried to stand. No problem. Gazed into the mirror. The candle was in the other room, but there was just enough light for Mel to see the face that stared back at her in horror. For one thing, her complexion was extremely pale. Dark circles around her eyes betrayed her lack of sleep. Her hair was a matted mess.

Oh my God...

She already looked like one of them.

Only the eyes were normal. There was fright behind them, but Mel recognized her own blue eyes and snapped out of the sudden funk. What did she expect? Of course she looked like

shit! After all she'd been through? Big frikkin' deal.

The athlete went back to the living room and sat on the couch again. It was amazing—she felt fine now. Just like last time, she was extremely sick for a while and threw up, and then after a little time had passed she was just like new. Did the disease always follow that pattern? These "attacks"—would they start to occur more often, or would she just experience a particularly bad one and then turn? The prospect terrified her.

Hell, I can't stay in here...

Time was indeed running out. If her theory was correct, then it was possible that the next nausea attack could be the killer. She had to get out and continue her way to the park. If the GRE had dropped anything in City Square that day, would it now all be gone? Did other survivors get to it before she did? Maybe it hadn't come yet. Perhaps it would arrive in the morning. She needed to *be there* if and when it did.

But it was also terribly dangerous on Nightmare Row at night. It was asking for more than just trouble. And then she remembered—

Aw, shit, I lost my bat! It's out there in the street!

Should she risk going down and looking for it? Or maybe there was another weapon there in the apartment. She picked up the candlestick and walked around the place again. The living room held nothing of interest, and then she recalled that the deceased gentleman in the bedroom was wearing a military uniform. Mel gathered the courage to return to the sad and creepy scene, opened the door, and went inside.

Holding the candle over the couple, she examined the man's clothing more closely. He wasn't wearing a gun and didn't have a blackjack. He didn't look like the Harran policemen she'd seen on the streets before D-Day. Mel guessed he was an officer of some kind in the

Harran army. Retired, perhaps.

She turned around to leave and then noticed the china cabinet on the other side of the room. Through the glass doors she could see displayed items from the man's military career. Another uniform, a flag, a few medals, and a sword.

A sword!

She opened the cabinet and took it out. The sword appeared to be an antique, as if it came from another time and era in Harran's history. The sheath wasn't wide; instead it was rather thin and slightly curved, and she guessed it was between three and four feet long. Mel gripped the hilt and gently pulled out the blade. It wasn't heavy. In fact, it was light and easily maneuverable. She whipped the weapon in the air a couple of times. The thing felt like a natural extension of her arm. Mel touched the edge of the steel and determined it was extremely sharp.

Next to the item's empty place in the cabinet stood a well-worn book with the word KILIJ written on the spine. Mel picked it up. On the cover was a picture of the same type of sword. Again, the word KILIJ appeared in English along with a lot of Arabic characters. She thumbed through the book to reveal several pictures of men using the sword. The book was written in Arabic, but it was obvious that she held an old manual for training with the weapon.

So, I guess this is a kilij. I've got myself a real Harran kilij. It'll be my souvenir of the wonderful trip I've had overseas. Someday I can sell it on e-Bay and make a lot of money, ha ha.

But it was going to be a more formidable weapon than a baseball bat. It even came with loops on the sheath so she could fasten it to her belt, too!

There was nothing else in the china cabinet of any use, so she turned to the couple on the bed and said, "I'm sorry, I'm taking you're sword, but I need it more than you do right now. I

hope you understand."

She left the bedroom and closed the door. Back in the kitchen, she refilled her water bottle and then headed to the front door. As an afterthought, she stopped and went back to the dining room table. Mel blew out the candles, pulled them out of the candlesticks, stuck the candles and one holder in her backpack, and then grabbed the wand butane lighter.

Now I'm ready.

Before leaving the building and facing the evil that walked the night, Mel took one last look at the melancholy little apartment. The two souls in the bedroom had given up, but they had ended their lives peacefully and, more importantly, together.

They must have really loved each other.

After a moment, Mel eventually walked out and left the building.

13

11:00pm.

It was a very different environment on Nightmare Row at night. The bright sunlight and oppressive heat was gone, replaced by the sharply contrasting pallet of black and white and a prickly chill that penetrated to the bone. The moon cast long shadows and turned the street into chiaroscuro imagery that often tricked the eye into believing something was there that wasn't. What little illumination emanating from street lamps was weak, and in many places nonexistent due to destruction. The most innocent of objects—light posts, garbage cans, abandoned baby carriages—became malevolent shapes in the dark. Worst of all were the corpses that littered the pavement. In the daylight they were bad enough; at night they exhibited even more intense characteristics of the unholy. Harran might have been hell during the day, but it wasn't even close to the sinister and treacherous atmosphere of the city-state in the twilight.

Infected roamed the street at faster paces. They were much more animated, displaying agility akin to normal humans and perhaps even stronger. The noises they made were louder, angrier, and scarier. Screams in the distance grew in frequency. Death hovered over the road like an omniscient demon ready to pounce.

Maybe I should have stayed in the apartment, Mel thought as she crouched behind a car parked at the curb. Nevertheless, she forged ahead and continued her method of darting from one piece of cover to another, waiting, and moving again. She had to be as quiet as a mouse and as invisible as a strand of hair. So far, so good. Mel feared they might be able to smell her better at night since the rest of their senses were more attuned. She could only hope for the best and keep going.

Eventually she came to the end of the block and had to cross another big intersection. Before doing so, she hid behind an overturned police car and scanned all four directions. Whatever movement she could see was pretty far away. Darting to the other side was a risk, but she felt her chances were better than usual. After taking a couple of deep breaths, Mel took off and dashed to the opposite corner and ducked into a storefront alcove.

She realized she had reached the section of the road that consisted of touristy shops and restaurants that the younger boys had told her about earlier that day. That meant she was very close to City Square—just another block away. This part of Nightmare Row sported more Western fast food franchises and dozens of souvenir and clothing stores. Most had demolished storefronts and were ransacked.

As she moved stealthily along the street, she noticed a dark hulk of a shape in the middle of the road ahead. It was some kind of truck. As she got closer, Mel recognized it as a tank. The smell of something like burnt toast was quite pungent; the military vehicle had been scorched. Two bodies lay beside it on the pavement; from the helmets on their heads, she could tell they had been soldiers. Might they have any weapons? It was worth a look.

Mel gazed both directions and then quickly scurried to the corpses. They had been charred to a blackened crisp, although the head and face of one had been untouched by the flames—the man's expression was frozen in a mask of pain and terror. She ignored the staring, vacant eyes that gazed blankly at the stars and searched around his person. Whatever guns or rifles he or the other man had been carrying were long gone. Nothing was attached to their belts. No luck. Other survivors had got to them first.

More screams cut through the chill of the night and they sounded as if they had come from the direction she was headed. Mel stood and peered up the road; it was a long block, and

she could see nothing but the ghostly shapes of unmoving obstacles scattered along the way. She started to slip back to the side of the road next to the storefronts, when she heard scraping on the other side of the tank. Mel halted and stood as still as a statue, listening for movement. There was a slurping sound accompanied by wheezing.

Christ, Infected are just a few feet away!

If she ran back to the sidewalk, she'd be seen. What to do? Run anyway or stay motionless and silent and hope for the best?

Growls, snarls, and those sickening, smacking noises Infected always made with their lips and tongues were heard shifting around the tank. There were several of them.

Please don't smell m—!

To Mel, a huge mob of Infected stepped into view at the end of the tank, but in reality it was only three males. They spotted her, screeched, and *ran* toward the athlete. Forget moving stealthily! She wasted no time—Mel bolted north on the road. She figured she had twenty or thirty feet ahead of her pursuers, but the race was on. Mel pushed herself into high gear and demonstrated a perfectly-executed parkour jump off a derelict car. Landing back on the pavement, this maneuver had rewarded her with another twenty feet in the lead.

But it was to no avail. The three Infected were simply running at inhuman speeds. Mel was astounded. She felt them gaining on her at an unbelievable pace, even though she was giving it all she had. The athlete refused to accept the truth at first; she valiantly thought—*I'm a trained athlete, by God!*—and focused on breathing and speed. But as the three monsters were nearly at her heels, she had to face the facts—

I'm no match for them!

They charged closer...

Mel peered ahead; the moon, reflected on a wide widow on the second floor of a building, caught her attention. Not only was there a terrace, but a truck was parked directly beneath it!

Oh my God, can I do this?

She made a sharp veer just as an Infected's grimy hand reached out to grab the back of her jacket.

I have to try—there's no other way!

Mel used the truck's hood to vault over the top, grab hold of a protuberance on the side of the building, clutch the rail on the terrace, and pull herself up. Her feet landed on a private balcony, for it was furnished with a couple of easy chairs and table on a carpet, along with dead plants in pots. She looked over the rail to see three frustrated, pissed-off Infected shouting at her and clawing the air—but they couldn't for the life of them figure out how to get up to that second floor.

Christ, that was too frikkin' close. This is more dangerous than I thought. I can't outrun them. What do I do? I can't wait until morning! Shit shit shit!

She turned to her right and saw a succession of balconies spaced every ten feet or so along the buildings.

Crap. All right, we can do this.

Mel charged forward, got a running jump on the rail, twisted her body so that her feet hit the wall, and then pushed off from it—a classic parkour feat called a Tic Tac that turned her into a ricocheting projectile. She successfully landed on the adjacent terrace. Without stopping, she used her momentum to jump harder and higher, bounce off the wall again, and alight on the next ledge. After doing this four times, she had thoroughly confused the Infected pursuing her on the

ground and left them behind under the third balcony. Mel made one more jump, tapped the wall and kicked... and *crashed* through the floor of the next terrace. Apparently the owners of that apartment were in the process of repairing their balcony, for at least half of it was missing!

She fell hard on top of a sedan, hitting her left side with the hips taking most of the impact. An inadvertent cry escaped her throat as excruciating pain shot down her legs and up her spine. It was too late to have a hope in hell that the Infected hadn't seen her. They were already running toward the car. She had to move or she would die.

Mel rolled off the car, hit the pavement, and started running again. The throbbing in her left hip and side was intense, but she was pretty sure she hadn't broken anything. It was a miracle she hadn't severed her spinal cord and become paralyzed.

The creatures started to gain on her again, so Mel slipped between parked vehicles and disappeared into an open door of a dark shop. There was very little illumination, but she ran down an aisle containing what appeared to be various sized cans of something. At the end she found a counter with a computer monitor—the cash register—so she vaulted over the shelf and ducked underneath.

Breathe... nothingness... breathe... above all, be frikkin' quiet*!*

She listened. Aside from the distant cries that were always present, Mel heard no scraping footsteps, no wheezing, and no growling. Had they entered the shop? She noticed next to her an open door to a storeroom and office. Could she slip in and shut the door quietly?

Wait... wait...

When she hadn't heard anything for a full five minutes, Mel stood and gazed into the darkness of the store. She carefully went around the counter and down another aisle toward the front. The dim lighting revealed paint brushes, frames, and sketch pads. At the front of the store

was a display of paintings, most of them of Harran landmarks. It was an artist supply store. The incongruity of it flabbergasted her. She went up and down the aisles and saw all kinds of paints, cans of turpentine, brushes, canvases, easels, clay, and sculpting utensils. Apparently it wasn't stuff looters would find very useful, so they'd left it alone.

Slowly approaching the hole that was the shop's entrance, she continued to listen for the sound of any movement. Had she eluded them? They must have passed her by or turned around and gone back the other way. She exhaled with relief and stuck her head out to take a look at the street.

And there they were, drool dripping from the corners of their mouths and the golden eyes boring holes into her. Their animalistic howls were jubilant—they had found her! Mel involuntarily screamed and jerked back into the shop, but the three monsters were hot on her trail. Instinct directed her to run through the aisles to the back of the store, where she dived into the storeroom/office and slammed the door behind her. She knew it wouldn't stop them; her only chance of escape was through the back door to the alley. Not concerned whether or not more Infected were waiting for her in the rear, Mel frantically slid back the bolt on the door, opened it, and burst through.

Unfortunately, there *were* creatures behind the building, only thirty feet away. Six of them, stampeding toward her. What now? She couldn't very well return to the shop and face the first group. She had nowhere to go.

It was all over.

14

11:30pm.

However, there *was* a way out—just not horizontally.

Mel looked above her to the left and saw the fire escape structure attached to the outside wall of the building. The bottom rung of the pull-down ladder was ten feet off the ground; it was normally lowered from the second floor landing. A garbage dumpster sat between her and the only possibility of a getaway.

She didn't think about it; her training and reflexes kicked in as she hurtled sideways, grabbed the side of the dumpster, and vaulted to its top. Without breaking her momentum, she leaped and managed to clutch the end rung of the ladder. It began sliding down with her weight, but she climbed the rungs as they descended past her. She made it to the second floor landing and then stormed the zigzagging staircase. It was a three story building. The escape went all the way to the roof. Surely they couldn't—

Shit! They're climbing after me!

Apparently they weren't so stupid after all. Two of the three Infected had also taken advantage of the lowered ladder.

Mel threw her legs over the stone rail around the roof and stood on a blank, flat surface. Not wanting to have to deal with her pursuers for the foreseeable future, she decided to draw the kilij and stand her ground. She turned back to the edge and raised the blade high. The first Infected had already reached the third floor landing; now all he had to do was climb the short fixed ladder to the roof and—

She swung the sword and struck the man on the head. The kilij merely glanced off of

him; it cut him badly, but it didn't kill him. Mel swung again, aiming for the neck. *Yes! Cut his head off! It's the only way!*

But she wasn't as good a swordsman as she'd thought. Mel kept missing the intended target because in reality she didn't know what she was doing. She had never learned how to use a sword in her life, so she just slashed at the Infected as if he were a chopping block. Her blows kept him at arm's length but it didn't *stop* him; she couldn't continue this unless she landed a lucky blow on the creature's neck.

So she raised her leg, bent her knee, and kicked the Infected in the face as hard as she could. He lost his grip on the ladder and fell ten feet to the landing.

Mel didn't waste any time—she set off across the roof, which was wider than most in the city. Both Infected were over the rail in seconds and quickly gained on her. With their added strength and speed, the danger had increased twofold. Nevertheless, when she reached the northern-most edge of the roof, she performed a parkour broad jump over the gap of maybe eight feet and landed on the adjacent building. This one had a roof-access stairwell door protruding from the surface.

Please don't be locked!

An Infected made the leap across the gap as easily as she did and was right behind her. Mel reached the stairwell, fumbled with the knob, and the door swung open! Mel flung herself inside and slammed the door shut. She pushed the button on the knob to lock it, and then she backed into the darkness. A tremendous slam hit the door on the other side. Could they break it down? Possibly. Mel felt for the railing and the first step down. Once she found it, she was able to hurry to the floor below. Her eyes began to get used to the blackness and she could make out the shapes of the steps. The pounding continued on the door above.

She tried the entrance to the second floor, but it was locked. Turning to continue down the next flight, she tripped over what felt like a log. Mel yelped and fell, hitting the cement steps hard and then rolling down to the next landing.

Oh Christ...

That had hurt. She looked up and saw a silhouette of a human form; she had tumbled over a dead body. Great. What a surprise. The athlete took stock of her body and discovered she could still move her arms and legs. She was able to sit up, but she knew she would have bruises all over.

The pounding two floors above finally culminated in a sickening *crack*. They had broken down the door. No time to lose. Mel pulled herself to her feet, winced at the pain in her leg where she'd been bitten, and proceeded down the stairs to the ground floor. Upon bursting out the stairwell door, she found herself in a carpet shop. They were a dime-a-dozen in New Town, for every tourist with extra money to spend wanted a fancy Turkish or Persian or Harran carpet to take home. Rolls of carpet sat on the floor and many rugs hung on the walls and on racks.

The room was also the final resting place of four dead people. Dressed in traditional Muslim clothing, the corpses had been fed upon and were now emaciated, blackened carrion. Being confronted with the gruesome sight caused a new wave of nausea to roll through Mel's abdomen.

She could hear the Infected storming down the stairs. What to do? Run into the street, where there were more Infected? No way. Was there a place to hide?

Mel looked up. There was a gaping hole in the ceiling, maybe four feet in diameter, most likely caused during the destructive firefight between the Harran army and the Infected during

that first week of horror. It was directly above a rack of carpets.

No time to think about it—she took a running start and leaped high onto the rack, knocking the carpet to the floor. She climbed the ladder-like structure and reached the top, but she was still five feet lower than the ceiling. Crouching on the top pole of the rack like a monkey, she propelled herself high and grabbed hold of the edge of the hole. The plaster crumbled in her left hand. She yelped with fright as she nearly fell—but she quickly clutched another side of the hole with her free hand. Ushering every ounce of strength in her arms, she pulled herself up and into the hole. It was a narrow space between the shop's ceiling and the floor of the room above. She lay there and shut her eyes, just as the stairwell door down below smashed open and the Infected entered the shop.

A sickness attack collided with her full force and the world spun. At first she thought she was rolling and that the Infected would hear her, but it was just her equilibrium going crazy. Mel had never been particularly claustrophobic, but the fact that she couldn't move in the cramped space, even if she'd wanted to, made the queasiness worse.

Christ, oh no, don't throw up, please, don't let me throw up, oh shit, oh....

Vomiting would indeed be a problem in that restricted space and with Infected standing a few feet below.

Breathe... nothingness... breathe... nothingness... oh, I'm gonna be sick, shit, I'm gonna... breathe... nothingness... fight it!

Frustrated snarls and growls floated around in the shop. The Infected probably smelled her but they didn't see her. She heard slurping and snapping near the pile of carpet rolls—one of the creatures was feasting on the nearest corpse.

That made Mel gag, but she clinched her mouth shut and kept her eyes closed to block

the yellow glare that flooded her vision. She felt panic building in her chest.

Breathe... nothingness...

The dizziness compounded and exacerbated the impression that she was stuck in a centrifuge, spinning out of control, pushing her stomach and intestines up into her chest and throat. This was accompanied by severe abdominal cramps that made her want to cry out.

Breathe... nothingness... breathe... noth—

*

She opened her eyes with a start.

Oh my God, I can't move! They have me tied up! I've been buried alive! I'm—

And she remembered where she was—in a restricted space between a shop's ceiling and a higher floor. She had passed out from the pain and nausea. But she hadn't vomited! Hooray! The sensation had passed. She was no longer rotating in a sea of hallucinatory muck.

I have to get out of here. Mel couldn't take being cramped in the coffin-like gap any longer; in a moment she would go mad and scream.

Listen! Concentrate! Are they still down there?

All was quiet. She couldn't hear the chomping and slurping. No footsteps.

Wait just a little while longer to make sure...

Mel closed her eyes and once again commanded herself to *breathe* and enter *nothingness*... the relaxation technique was much easier now that the sickness attack had dissipated. She felt the panic and fright ease away as the silence informed her that she was indeed alone.

Finally, she peered out the hole and took stock of the shop. It was safe to move. Mel crawled out feet first and attempted to stand on the top carpet rack, but she slipped and fell.

Luckily, she dropped on a pile of carpets. The plunge was heavy and hard, but it could have been worse. She stood, unsteadily grabbing hold of another hanging carpet to stabilize herself. The store was empty and still dark. Moonlight from the night sky shone through windows and a busted door. Mel took a deep breath, but she still didn't feel right.

Maybe if I got some fresh air...

She staggered toward the door, took two steps, and another wave of cramps and queasiness hit her like a sledgehammer. It was payback for her body granting her earlier wish of not allowing her to throw up while inside a crawlspace; now that she was free it all came up. Mel dropped to her knees, leaned forward, and vomited all over the rug that had caught her fall. Then she crawled away from the mess, collapsed on a clean, dry spot of the soft material, and lost consciousness again.

15

1:30am.

Her wristwatch still worked. When Mel opened her eyes, she glanced at the time and cursed herself for falling asleep. She sat up and realized she was still in the carpet shop, lying on the rug not far from where the mess from her stomach was already drying. It was only by the grace of God that no Infected had wandered in to find her.

Once again, she felt remarkably better. She hadn't turned. Mel pinched herself to convince herself she wasn't dreaming, and then she stood. Reaching into the backpack, she found the water bottle and had a healthy swig from it. There wasn't a lot left. She knew it needed to be conserved, but vomiting had left her dehydrated. Hopefully she'd soon find another source for water.

Best to keep moving. The athlete crossed to the open door to peek outside at Nightmare Row. Surprisingly, she saw no Infected, but that didn't mean they weren't out there. She thought back to how she'd escaped those chasing her by parkour running across the roofs. The zombies had chased her to the top of a building because they'd seen her climb the fire escape. Would the Infected normally climb to a roof if they hadn't spotted her? She thought not. Perhaps the tops of buildings were the safest places along the road. It was worth taking a look.

With the kilij sheath on her belt, Mel went back to the stairwell and ascended past the second and third floors—this time she carefully stepped over the corpse she'd tripped over earlier—and emerged on the roof. She walked to the middle and gazed in all directions. The moon had gone down a little but it still cast a grey, ghostly luminosity over the city. The buildings formed an eerie tableau, but there were no Infected in sight. She was all alone. Nice!

Before heading north across the skyline, Mel did an inventory of her physical self. Was she up to the strenuous task? She had eaten nothing but a few old figs, some bread, and an apple. Not a lot of protein, which was something she normally craved. What if she jumped across a not-too-wide chasm between buildings and didn't make it? Did she have the strength and stamina to carry on?

Hell, if I fall, then at least I'll die trying.

First she approached the edge of the roof and estimated the length of the gap between buildings. Performing a successful broad jump depended on a calculation of geometry as much as it did agility. At what point on the roof should she make the actual leap? How much of an arc should she attempt? The higher the arc, the more distance covered in a shorter amount of time. But that was also very difficult to achieve.

In the end, though, it all came down to instinct and experience. Mel could look at a space and instantly know if she could jump over it, not taking into account her physical condition. Thus, it was a gamble, and Mel placed the first bet by moving back several yards, picking up her speed from a walk to a run, and charging toward the edge of the roof. She hit full throttle as she approached the rail. She then kicked at the precise moment and shot into the air, soaring over the rail and becoming, for an seemingly eternal moment, suspended over emptiness. To her it always felt like slow-motion, but in reality, the jump took a mere two seconds from her feet leaving the first roof and landing on the second.

And she made it just fine.

After a brief slow-down, Mel stepped on the gas again, built up her speed, and bounded to the next roof. She had to do it three more times, and eventually she was at the end of the block, the last building before the big intersection separating her from City Square. She'd have

to travel the rest of the way on the ground.

In order to catch her breath and slow the heart pounding in her chest, she stood with her hands on her knees at the northern-most edge of the roof. She could see all of the park and the impressive landscape around it. City Square was just that—really a rectangle—upon which a single building stood facing west. It took up only twenty-five per cent of the square; the rest of the plot was indeed a park with trees, benches, and even playground equipment in the southeast corner. She saw no signs that the GRE had dropped anything there. That didn't mean they hadn't, but most likely it was a sign that she had arrived before them. And that was good.

The four-story-high structure on the square was on the antiquity side of Harran architecture. The guide on the obligatory two-hour "best of Harran" tour had called it the City Hall of the town. The President didn't rule from there—that was a place in another part of the city, a palace, really—but other branches of the government agencies were headquartered there. To Mel it didn't look like anything but a plain stone building. Several statues in front and to the sides of the structure could provide necessary cover. That was a plus.

Spanning diagonally from each corner of the square were major roads. Nightmare Row connected to the southwest corner. Those boys had said the "nest"—the high school—was on the avenue pointing northwest, but she wasn't high enough to see that far. Directly across the road from the park stood a high-rise, modern apartment building called The Desert Oasis. Cheesy name, but supposedly this was a very fancy, exclusive place to live in the city-state. Several other similar buildings stood across from the park, lining the west side of the street. New Town. Very different from the rest of Harran. Mel thought this part of the city resembled just about any major urban center in America.

Gazing at the hundreds of bodies lying in the road, on the sidewalks, and in the park,

didn't bother Mel. She had grown cold and hardhearted in the last several hours. After you've seen a few dozen mutilated corpses, you've seen 'em all. There weren't as many as what were in the stadium, but City Square was literally dotted with cadavers.

And there were plenty of Infected moving about. It was as if she had a human's-eye view of an ant farm and could follow the insects' paths to and fro. Mel studied the creatures, trying to figure out if there *was* a pattern to their actions. The only thing she could ascertain was that clusters of Infected moved in both directions along the west side of the park up to the northwest corner, where the road jagged off in that direction... toward the alleged nest. Others lingered beneath flickering or weak street lamps, as if they were moths attracted to light.

Okay, quit procrastinating, Mel told herself. *Go downstairs and let's get over there.* Maybe there was a place to hide in the government building until morning. Maybe she should simply stay on the roof—it was relatively safe there—but that wouldn't be progress toward her goal. Maybe the GRE would come tomorrow. Maybe she wouldn't turn before then. Maybe, maybe, maybe...

This roof had an access to an inner stairwell, too, but the door was locked. The only way down was via the fire escape at the back of the building. She didn't like the narrow alley; it was too dark and scary, and she knew for a fact that Infected were all over it. But, since she didn't have a choice, Mel crossed to the top of the escape structure and gazed below. It *looked* clear, but it was difficult to tell. Much of the alley was in shadow.

Down she went. When she reached the ground, she flattened her back to the building exterior, listened, and waited. Actually, she reckoned it was better to cross the intersection to the park from the rear of the storefronts; she'd be less noticeable. Mel edged closer to the corner until she could view the entire cross-street and the southwest corner of the park. Three Infected

were in front of the City Hall structure, but they were pretty far away. She spotted two more in the road, closer to The Desert Oasis than the square. The trees in the park camouflaged much of the plot; there could be dozens of the monsters hiding in the shadows and she wouldn't know it. She did spy three or four of them huddled over some bodies near the swing set. They looked too busy to perceive her.

It was now or never.

Mel walked *slowly* into the four-lane-wide street, moving at a rate that hopefully didn't attract attention. At that distance perhaps they would think she was one of them. She just hoped her scent wasn't strong enough to attract them. It took a full ten seconds to cross; once she entered the park, Mel went straight to one of the stone benches that occupied the corner. She stopped there to scope out the territory and strategize. The plan was to stealthily move to the area where the statues stood in front of City Hall. From there she'd have a better position from which to enter the building—if that was even possible.

Next she sprinted to a tree, stopped, and waited. Then a dash to another tree, and so on, until she'd traversed a third of the park all the way to the first statue. The sculpture was that of an Ottoman warrior from long ago, but she couldn't have said who it was. The Arabic carved in the stone base was unreadable.

The next statue was thirty feet to the north, and that would place her in good proximity to the front of City Hall. Once again, she darted along the grass while keeping an eye out for Infected. She reached her target, halted, and scanned the vicinity. The front of the building was maybe twenty-five yards away. Stone steps led up to the massive old-fashioned front doors; one of them had been torn off its hinges and lay diagonally on the steps, leaving a gaping black hole through which one could pass—if one dared.

What if Infected are in there? It's a good possibility.

The sound of scraping shoes made her freeze and hold her breath. She had forgotten about the three Infected in front of City Hall that she'd seen from the alley. They had moved out of sight during her trip across the lower section of the park, but now they were back. Mel peered over the statue's base, through the figure's legs, and watched them. They appeared to be disoriented and lost, but occasionally they squatted next to corpses and buried their faces into the body cavities. Feeding. Two men and a smaller person—a child? She could hear them suck and snarl and slobber. Hopefully they would move on and not detect her, but she couldn't wait there forever.

The little one—a teenage boy, she thought—stood and went to another cadaver. As he stooped, a ray of moonlight caught the poor creature's clothing, and...

A Texas Longhorns shirt!

It hadn't looked particularly orange, as the pale illumination made everything appear black and white, and she didn't actually see the familiar longhorn bull logo. But still...

Paul?

The boy was in shadow again.

Is it him? It's a Longhorns T-shirt! I know it!

Before she could stop herself, she inadvertently called out, "Paul?"

Big mistake.

The two men and boy growled like ferocious bears and immediately bolted toward her. Mel had no time to ascertain if the kid was really Paul—she just ran toward the City Hall building with all her might. She had a good fifteen or twenty feet lead, but they were strong and fast. The athlete pushed her body to the limit, reached the sidewalk in front of the structure, took

the stone steps two at a time—there were ten—and prayed no Infected were waiting for her in the lobby. She flew through the opening that was once a door... and gasped in shock.

The lobby was *full* of corpses, deliberately arranged in piles. Mel had seen photographs and newsreels of mass graves in Nazi concentration camps when she was in World History class in high school, and the slaughterhouse before her was all too similar. She couldn't help hesitating and slowing down her getaway—the jolt of death laid out in front of her was almost too much to comprehend. The room was perhaps twenty yards wide and eight yards deep—and every inch of floor space was covered by bodies. Dozens of them, days old in death. The middle of the room was occupied by the largest pile—it might have been a stack of logs for a fireplace. The slaughterhouse that was the stadium was somehow not as sickening as *this*. The corpses in the street, playing field, and stands had died where they'd fallen. The collection of bodies here was a an indication that the Infected were hoarders, and this was one of their silos.

The screeching behind her was a reminder that she had to keep moving. Where to go? The place was dark, but there was just enough radiance seeping in from the moonlight to define shapes and features. Her eyes zipped across the back wall; her brain registered a reception desk, a couple of doors and an elevator. She clambered over the cadavers just as the two adult Infected entered the building. Wherever there was an elevator, there had to be stairs. She spotted a door near the closed elevator and was willing to take the chance that this was where she needed to go. Mel scrambled into the hallway, approached the door—signs in English and Arabic read "STAIRS"!—so she opened it, rushed through, and started climbing.

When she reached the second floor landing, Mel heard the Infected enter the stairwell and head up after her. She pushed herself with extra effort to increase her speed. At the third floor, she exited the stairwell and ran into a dark hallway lined with office doors. She tried the first

one and it was locked. The second one swung open and she swooped inside, finding herself in an outer office with a secretary's desk, coffee machine, and waiting room chairs. Another door on the back wall was marked in English and Arabic, "Harran Commission of Health," so she went through it to provide an additional layer of fortification between her and the pursuers.

She dared not turn on the lights. A little light crept in from a window, but it was enough for Mel to make out a very plush office. It reminded her more of the kind of English manor libraries she'd seen in movies. Shelves of books lined the walls, and red leather furniture and a large oak desk dominated the space.

The important thing at this point was to be deadly silent. She thought she could hear the Infected in the hallway outside searching for her. Would they smell her? Did they have the sense to search the offices? Mel crept around the desk, hid underneath, and waited. Her heart was beating a mile a minute, so she concentrated again on breathing and entering that state of *nothingness...*

Please don't come in... please go away...

Ten minutes went by. Fifteen.

The athlete slowly crawled out and stood. She was safe. Mel sat in the cushy chair behind the desk and tried to make sense of everything she had seen.

What were all those frikkin' bodies doing there in the lobby? It's as if the Infected had stored them there for some reason.

And most disturbing of all—

Was that Paul I saw? Was that his University of Texas T-shirt? It had *to be! Who else in Harran would be wearing such a shirt? Christ, he's alive! He's one of* them*, but he is alive! Does that mean there's a possibility he can be cured if and when the medicine arrives?*

She wished she knew more about the drug. *Would* it cure people who were already infected? Or was it only a preventive medication to keep humans from getting the disease?

All good questions, but there were no answers.

Mel made a further resolution.

I will *put him out of his misery if all else fails. Maybe he hangs out at that school, the nest those boys told me about. If that's true, maybe I can find him and... well, I'll put a bullet in his head. And then I'll do the same to me. We'll die together, brother and sister. But how am I going to get in there? If the school is a real nest, then it's probably* packed *with Infected.*

However, the reality of what she was pondering began to sink in. She knew then that she was most likely going to die, either by her own hand or by theirs. She preferred the former, of course. The truth, though, was that there was no way she could get into that school without being torn apart by wild animals. It was an impossible dream. It simply wouldn't work.

The facts were ugly and they hurt. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she said aloud, "I'm so sorry, Paul!" The sobs came hard and heavy. "I've failed you. I've failed us both. I'm so sorry!"

She laid her head on the desk and cried for her mother.

16

2:30am.

After getting hold of herself, Mel removed her backpack and set it on the floor by the desk. It would be nice to see better, but turning on the lights would be treacherous. Who knew what might be lurking in the hallways? She reached in and pulled out the candlestick, a candle, and butane lighter. *Voila*—light in the office, but not enough to attract attention. The flicker couldn't possibly be noticeable from the ground outside.

There were a couple of framed photographs on the desktop. One depicted a family—the man was bald with a beard, a woman wore a headscarf, and two teenage boys stood beside them. The other was just a picture of the woman. The wife of the man at whose desk she was sitting. The legend "Harran Commission of Health" was on the door, so perhaps she was now the new Commissioner of Health in the city. Ha.

Also on the desk were what appeared to be an appointment book and a journal. A tray of business cards written in Arabic and English told her that Khalim Abbas, MD, was indeed the real Commissioner of Health.

Hmm. So where is Dr. Abbas now? Dead, like all the others? One of them*?*

She opened the appointment book; many of the notes were hand-scribbled in Arabic but there was some English mixed in. It opened to a full month shown on two pages; she thumbed through the book and noticed that one day each week of every month was blocked off and the word SLUMS was written in. The rest appeared to be reminders of business meetings and such. Appointments had been set for weeks in advance of the current date.

The journal was hand-written entirely in Arabic, which wasn't surprising. After all, Dr.

Abbas wasn't American. That wasn't going to help her, so she left it where it was and got up to look around.

An expansive Turkish carpet covered the floor. A leather-covered couch looked awfully inviting. Her exhaustion had crept up on her and she was sorely tempted to lie down and sleep for days. But, of course, she didn't have *hours*, much less days. A door on one wall was slightly ajar. She pushed it all the way open and was amazed to see a full bathroom with a modern toilet and... *a shower*!

Whoa.

She stepped inside and used the facility. It flushed normally. She tried both the sink faucets and the shower—the running water still worked. There was even a white terrycloth robe hanging on the back of the door.

Back in the office, Mel noticed a small portable refrigerator in one corner. She rushed to it, opened it, and was amazed to see several bottles of water and soft drinks, some fruit, a six-pack of beer bottles, and a bottle of raki, all cold. She took a bottle, opened it, and chugged the precious liquid down her throat. She took a piece of fruit—a pear—and bit into it. It tasted wonderful. Carrying it and the water, she went to the only window in the room. It was a view of the back of the building. The electric lighting was either inoperable or inadequate, so the park below was dark and mostly covered by trees, but she could make out the swing set and benches in the moonlight. She also saw a few Infected moving about.

She brought the water and pear back to the desk and nearly tripped on a limp canvas bag that lay on the floor. She kicked it aside with her foot, noticing it was a large, potato sack-sized canvas international courier mailbag with draw-ties. Curious, Mel picked it up and shook it—but it was empty. She dropped it and then noticed the edge of something white sticking out from

under the desk. The athlete picked it up; it was a sealed, number ten envelope, stuffed thick. Dr. Abbas had used official stationery, so his name, title, and address were in the top left-hand corner. He had hand-written the addressee—Dr. Christina Marlow in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

Mel sat in the chair, fiddled with the letter for a bit, made a decision, shrugged, and opened the envelope. There were several pages, and she was happy to see that the letter was in English—typed, printed out from a computer. It was dated the Saturday of the parkour race at the Harran Global Athletic Games. So what happened? Why was it on the floor? Did Dr. Abbas drop it on his way out to mail it? There was no postage yet on the envelope, so he must have got sidetracked or something.

Hell, everyone got sidetracked that day.

Mel started reading. The first page was a cover letter.

Dear Christina:

I hope this letter finds you well. I am often reminded of our time in New York together when we were interns. Whenever I tell anyone that I received most of my medical education in America, people are impressed. How is your family? Gamze is fine and she sends you her love. Our sons are becoming very nice young men. Halil is seventeen and will be attending university in Istanbul. Mehmet is fifteen and can't wait to get out of the house!

Christina, I want to tell you about what's been going on here in

Harran lately. I didn't want to send an e-mail because I didn't want it in our system, so I'm writing a traditional letter for you to hold for safekeeping. Attached are bits and pieces of notes from cases I've handled over the last few weeks. I don't want to alarm you, but frankly I'm at my wit's end.

Essentially I am afraid that a strange and befuddling disease has come to the Slums area of Harran. You will see my notes on a case that first came to me at the Free Clinic, and how subsequent entries explain the way I believe the disease is spreading and what it might mean.

It's definitely some kind of virus that demonstrates itself similarly to rabies. It causes afflicted patients to exhibit aggressive, dangerous behavior, such as attacking others and attempting to bite them. The problem is that I have not been able to study the progression of the virus because patients simply disappear! That's right, they vanish—they run away from their homes and go into hiding somewhere in the city. And I say patient<u>s</u> because I saw more and more cases throughout the week following that first visit of young Jorin Baydar. The police received a lot of reports of missing persons in the Slums, and they were all previously people who were sick.

Then the bodies started showing up in the streets. Murder victims. People who had been attacked by someone or something. Most of them died from fatal wounds that resembled animal bites. In some cases, entire chunks of a victim's body had been chewed off, as if an animal had fed on it. In the beginning, the police chief and my dear friend, Kerim Demir, and I were sharing information; for example, it's a fact that the victims died from the bite of a human.

I have examined several patients and determined they have what I believe to be a deadly virus, and it's something I've never seen before. I have identified it from blood samples I collected from infected patients, but I can't tell you how it works or what it's doing exactly. That is beyond my expertise. In a separate package I am sending you some of these samples.

As you may know, the Harran Global Athletic Games began yesterday, and we have thousands of visitors here from all over the world. Our hotels are completely full and young athletes are competing in various contests. Last week at this time, once I learned of this virus and how it was spreading, I personally felt it was a big mistake to allow the Games to proceed. I attempted to warn President Hamid and other members of the Cabinet, but no

one would listen. You see, it was vitally important that the Games take place for Harran's economy. The government hopes the Games will bring in much needed commerce, as well as focus the world's attention on Harran for a brief moment—resulting in more tourism.

At any rate, I am very worried. The Games have begun and it appears that the virus and attacks have moved beyond the Slums and have infiltrated other areas of the city, including New Town, where most of the tourists, and our stadium, where the Games are being held, is located. Just in the past few days, Kerim has reported to me that there have been several murders near the stadium.

At the beginning of the week, there was a high-level meeting with the president, Kerim, myself, and others. I pleaded with the president to cancel the Games, but he wouldn't do it—he couldn't *do it. It was simply too late. Everything was in motion; PIOT—the organization sponsoring the Games—was already here and setting up the stadium. Most athletes and their families had already arrived. The international press was here. In other words, the show had to go on.*

I told President Hamid that I had no choice but to report it to all the international health organizations that we were dealing with a very dangerous virus. President Hamid actually ordered me not to do so, and said that I was "overreacting." I personally think there was an implicit threat made about my job.

Four days ago, Tuesday, the Games began with an opening ceremony in the evening. That morning, however, something of a very serious nature occurred, and yet our news outlets have yet to report it. There was nothing on Wednesday, Thursday, nor yesterday—Friday, or today—Saturday (I am relieved that after tonight the Games will be finished!). My fear is that somehow my government is intentionally keeping the news from the public; but I suppose my superiors could very well be doing the right thing—this news would cause a panic.

This is what happened Tuesday morning— At New Town High School, where students aged 13 to 18 attend, there was some kind of violent "gang fight" that sent students and staff running into the street. This school is not far from my office at City Square.

All kinds of rumors were going around in the first few hours after the incident, but it was known that many people—kids and adults—

were killed.

For that entire day, I'm sorry to say, I stayed in my office, helpless to do anything. I had been told point blank by the president that "it would be handled and not to worry about it." What? He ordered me to remain in my office and await the phone call that would alert me to the post-mortems, and that's when I would get involved. So I did, but no calls ever came. Ever. *And it's two days later. They've kept the details from me just as they have from the press. And I am Commissioner of Health!*

I do know this. The total dead at the school number twenty-seven. Five of these were teachers, twelve were students, and ten were "rampaging thugs," *of various ages and genders—I've heard there were three women and I've also heard there were four. They came in and just started attacking people—trying to kill them by biting them. By the time police arrived, it was too late, it was simply chaos. The ten intruders were shot dead.*

What happened next is a mystery to me. Yesterday, when I asked for details, I was more or less told to mind my own business. It was a "police matter," not a medical matter. I tried to contact my friend Kerim, but he has been unreachable for days.

Last night I was here in the office, working late, making phone calls, trying to find out something. *Well, I fell asleep on my sofa at one point and awoke just before sunup. I said my prayers and then drove home; I was exhausted. I usually drive by New Town High School on the way to my house. Christina, there were dozens and dozens of people out, and they all appeared to be walking toward the school. And I could tell, I could just* tell, *these people were infected with the virus. When they saw my car, some ran after me—I drove away very fast, but it was really quite frightening.*

After a few hours of restless sleep, I came to the office again this morning to finish this letter to you and prepare the package of blood for you. You will know what to do with the samples. I don't care about President Hamid's orders. The person on the line told me to send a blood sample by overnight courier. The postal office is supposed to be open today during the Games, so I'm going there now. To tell the truth, I am still frightened because I think I heard gunshots outside. I must rush! I will phone or e-mail you next week, so please don't worry about me. I will do what I think is right.

Sincerely yours,

Khalim

Whoa. *This is frikkin' unbeeeelievable.* Mel read the letter again and then started going through the attached patient files. The notes were written in Arabic, so no luck, although there was a skull X-ray attached to one folder. Abbas or someone else had used a white marker to draw arrows pointing to dark spots on the brain. She dropped the letter on the desk and tried to still her accelerating heart.

So the Harran government knew *about this?*

She wondered again what happened to Dr. Abbas and why the letter was on the floor. There was no sign of the package of blood samples he was sending to America. The only thing she could speculate was that he was in an awful hurry to get out of there, and maybe he dropped the letter and didn't realize it until later. But did he go to the post office and send the package anyway? Maybe that was how the GRE knew what kind of medicine to drop. Abbas sent blood samples to his friend, and she got them where they needed to go. Now GRE was responding, after two weeks. Maybe. The GRE also could have obtained samples from a number of other sources. Something *else* could have happened to Dr. Abbas, too. Maybe he was on the way to the post office and got attacked by Infected. The good doctor was either dead or was now one of them. Or maybe his own government caught him sending shit to the USA and *they* did something to him. Who knew?

Mel shrugged. *Or maybe he's alive and he just doesn't want to come to work!*

At any rate, he'd left his journal and appointment book behind—which meant he had planned to return.

Not a good sign.

17

3:00am.

Mel drank more water and considered chugging a cold beer from the fridge, but against it. She didn't even like beer. decided *Hey, and besides you're not frikkin' old enough, either!* she thought to herself, and that made her laugh aloud. As if she could possibly give a damn about American drinking age laws in her present situation! No, the real reason she didn't drink any beer was because she wanted to keep her head clear. Well, as clear as it could be, seeing that she could turn into a raving zombie at any moment.

Reading Dr. Abbas' letter to the woman in the States brought back memories of that first week in Harran. The signs of trouble had been there, but everything was being sugar coated. The government didn't want the international visitors to see or hear what was really going on in the city.

Shame on them.

The rumors, the violence she'd seen in the streets, Lucy and Jean-Pierre going missing—why didn't anyone raise an alarm? Of course, people were in a foreign country with a very exotic and, to Westerners, very mysterious culture. Who were they to say what was unusual? Unfounded prejudices against Muslims also possibly colored perceptions, especially among the Americans, as to what was going on in the city beyond their immediate zone of comfort. Violence in a Muslim world? Wasn't that par for the course? Mel, her family, Coach Barnes, and her fellow athletes all paid no attention as long as it wasn't right in front of them. The incident at the restaurant in Old Town had been unsettling, but Mel herself hadn't become truly aware of a wider scope of violence until it was too late, after Lucy was gone.

It was everyone's—and her own—damned fault.

But no one could have foreseen what finally happened that last Saturday night of the Games. Everything was leading to the clincher—D-Day. It was a moment in time Mel would never forget.

*

For the elaborate parkour race, the climax and main event of the Harran Global Athletic Games, contestants were assigned a color. Each athlete had to run around the track and collect ribbons of his or her designated hue. The winner not only had to be the first one over the finish line, but also the bearer of all the appropriate ribbons. Obstacles had been designed and placed on the stadium's playing field. These structures were on wheels and movable, and they could be quickly reconfigured into different shapes. One, for example, looked like a facade of a townhouse. The ribbons were affixed to a second story balcony rail, so the contestants had to use parkour techniques to jump and climb to the rail, retrieve the ribbons, and then continue on. As soon as all the athletes had taken their respective ribbons, the obstacle was moved and changed to be a different shape before the competitors got all the way around the field to approach it again. There were six such structures on the track, and PIOT volunteers and staff worked to keep the changes smooth and quick. Some obstacle configurations were repeated later in the race to test the athletes' ability to learn from the previous experience with that challenge. The time of the entire race was approximately thirty minutes, and the contestants usually did as many as six full laps around the field by the time someone won and ended the contest.

In the athletes' locker room before the race, Mel finished dressing and performing her *breathe-nothingness* exercises. Jakub, who was also competing, walked by and slapped her on the butt.

"Hey!" she snapped at him.

"Looking good, there, Mel," he said. "I like you in shorts, you have great legs."

She almost cursed at him, but she didn't want to spoil the relaxation she had just achieved. Getting angry would only distract her. Instead, she just glared and let him walk on. Nothing could be gained by fighting with the jerk right before the event.

Mel grabbed another swig of water before moving into position to march out on the field, but then she heard the horses whinnying down below. They sounded as if they were distressed. Ever since the opening ceremony on Thursday, the animals had been kept in stables beneath the stadium.

She turned to Sefu and asked, "What's with the horses? Do you hear them?"

"Yeah," he answered. "Maybe they're going stir-crazy or something."

Mel, who was familiar with horses, disagreed. "No, they sound like they're frightened. I'm going to take a look."

"Hurry back, we go in five minutes."

She ran down the corridor and a flight of stairs to the lower level, where the whinnies were louder and more intense. Mel entered the stables and saw that the horses were wild-eyed, bucking, baring their teeth and frothing, and acting as if the place was on fire.

"Whoa, whoa there," she said soothingly. "What's wrong, guys? It's all right. Settle down."

Where was the blasted handler? He should be here doing something.

Access to the playing field for the horses was through a vomitorium that led up a ramp from the lower level to ground level. The doors were open, so maybe the noise of the crowd was disturbing the animals. Never mind—there was no time to worry about it. She rushed back

upstairs and joined the line of athletes just as the event was announced. The crowd went crazy with cheers and applause. Mel marched out with the other nine competitors; the ten were chosen for their outstanding abilities in parkour and represented America, the United Kingdom, Russia, Hungary, Japan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Australia, Germany, Italy, and Ethiopia. Daku, the Aboriginal athlete from Australia, was favored to win. Mel was one of only two women; Gabrielle, from Italy, was the other.

She felt nervousness and excitement, which was not unusual, but there was also a twinge of apprehension. What was she afraid of? It wasn't the usual butterflies in her stomach that always cropped up before a race; this was something more like premonition—the fear of a coming catastrophe. Those horses had spooked her.

The athletes assumed their places on the starting line. The sun had gone down and the air was cool and pleasant. Mel looked up at the night sky but couldn't see any stars because of the bright lights shining on the field. She glanced into the stands—which weren't as full as they'd been the previous day—and spied where her parents and brother were sitting. They were tiny dots among a sea of faces, but she could see them waving at her. The announcer introduced the contestants over the loud speakers in both English and Arabic, and then it was time.

The starting gun fired and the race began. Mel pushed off the blocks and quickly found herself in a trio of leaders that included Daku and Jakub. The first obstacle was a ramp leading up to a "wall" where the ribbons were stuck. She had to run up the ramp, climb the wall, take the ribbon, and descend. However, Daku decided to simply vault over the wall and use the back of the obstacle as a way of going down. *Smart move*, Mel thought, so she tried it. Two-by-four supports held up the wall in the rear, so she used one in tightrope fashion to scamper down to the ground. Other competitors tried to mimic what she and Daku had done and three of them fell. It

slowed the athletes down, but no one was hurt.

Mel had always been told by other runners that they lose track of time during a race, or that it doesn't exist, or whatever. She, however, was fully aware of how many minutes passed when she ran. One of her strategies was to set a goal not by distance, but rather by the passage of time she was able to sense during the race. In this case, when five minutes was up, she wanted to have completed one full lap and a half. By doing this, she would then push herself that much harder in order to achieve a goal that none of her competitors had and probably would consider unrealistic. When that was done, she'd set a new goal for the following five minutes, and so on. She knew that by the time she reached the fifth set of five-minute-goals, the race would soon be over and the winner would most likely be quite apparent to the other runners and to the audience as well. A clear winner often could be foreseen after four complete laps; so a lot of energy was spent at the beginning of a race to establish a lead.

The race was off to an exciting beginning, as she did indeed share the front with Jakub and Daku, as predicted. However, it was early and anything could happen. The athletes ran, leaped, climbed, and propelled themselves over obstacles at a jaw-dropping pace. It was, if anything, an immensely entertaining spectacle, and the crowd roared in appreciation.

As Mel approached her second complete lap, nearing the section in the stands where her family was sitting, she noticed some commotion among the spectators. It was just out of the corner of her eye, and she didn't have time to look again. Even pausing to get a better glimpse could cost her time and distance. She tried to interpret what she'd seen—it looked like a fight had broken out. Several people were pushing or shoving or *something*. Mel put it out of her mind for the time being and concentrated on the next obstacle, which was a bowl as big as a living room. Get in the bowl, grab the ribbon, and get out. Easier said than done.

After ten minutes was up, Mel came around again. This time she heard *screams* as she gazed more closely at the stands. She nearly gasped and halted, for the "fight" had spread over three consecutive sections. People were panicking and fleeing their seats. Several spectators jumped over the rails to the field.

What the hell is going on?

She worried because the violence appeared to be one section away from where her family sat. Her concern cost her the lead, for Jakub slipped ahead of Mel as she hesitated. Not ready to concede so early, Mel took off at full speed again.

Then came the terrified whinnies of the horses. The animals were suddenly *stampeding onto the field*! Mel looked back at the door in the arena out of which they had marched with the horses in the opening ceremony—and they were the wide open ones she'd seen in the stables area. The horses had either broken out or someone had *let* them out. But why in the world were they so frightened?

The noise from the audience changed abruptly from cheers to screams. Mel forced herself to slow down and let Jakub go on ahead of her. She was too far away to see it clearly, but she could tell that people were now evacuating her parents' section. The violence had reached them. A different kind of scream—a horrible, shrieking, animalistic growl times three—came from the field in front of her.

Three men with blood all over them were running toward her. They were thirty feet away, but she could see that something was off about them. Not only did they appear completely mad, but their eyes... they were like yellow pin-lights. And then, Jonas, the Ethiopian boy, passed her, and he was heading right for them. The mad golden-eyed men veered off their original course and *shot* toward Jonas and tackled him! They began *biting* him on his exposed

arms and legs as the Ethiopian yelled bloody murder.

Oh my God, that was nearly me!

She turned and gasped in horror. A mob of the mad yellow-eyed people came charging out of the arena door. Dozens of them. They were obviously the cause of the horses' panic. Who were they? What was wrong with them? These thought processes were interrupted by cries in the stands, diverting her attention there. The skirmishes in the seats were spectators fighting with more of the mad men!

Mel instinctively bolted toward her family's section. She lost sight of everything else happening around her. The horror unfolding in the arena simply didn't register at that moment. Later, the images would haunt her every night, but then and there the focus was to make sure her mother, father, and brother were all right.

But Harran Stadium had become a bloodbath.

It was the first public—*very* public—encounter with Infected. Some of it was caught on television and seen around the world. It appeared that the diseased people had organized; whether it was by intelligence or by instinct, Mel didn't know, but they had slowly been building a swarm that could take down an entire stadium of people. Had the attack been planned for that Saturday night, or was it simply a coincidence?

The fact that it was nighttime didn't help matters. The Infected were deadly fast and mercilessly vicious. Each one—a man or woman or child—would latch on to a horrified spectator and chomp hunks out of the victim's body with the speed of a piranha. After three or four helpings, the Infected dropped the screaming, bleeding person and attacked another. It was happening in the stands and on the field. Several of the runners were caught; they ended the race fighting for their lives against predators who wanted to tear out their throats. Some Infected

went after the horses and were strong and quick enough to grab hold of one of the rampaging beasts and sink teeth into them, too.

The sound of police sirens seared the air. The bedlam increased in intensity as groups of Harran policemen dressed in riot gear rushed onto the field. Gunshots, shouts, more unearthly wails. By this point, it was difficult to tell who was an Infected and who was just a spectator driven hysterical by the turmoil. There was no question, though—people were dying left and right. The havoc had exploded into a slaughterhouse of spurting blood, screaming victims, and gunfire.

Mel finally reached her family's section. The madness had hit there, too, for the benches were smeared with red; wounded or dead spectators were draped around the stand like ragdolls. And her mother, father, or brother were not visible. Anywhere.

"Mom! Dad!" She cried out, frantically scanning the bleachers. The best thing would be to get up there, so she rushed into the nearest vomitorium to access the concourse within the stadium. At the top of the inner ramp was a child, no more than ten years old, snapping her jaws and snarling like a feral cat. Blood provided a grotesque lipstick for the girl, and her little dress had long ago become shredded, filthy, and covered in old and fresh red splotches. The thing shrieked and ran at Mel—who used the side of the vomitorium to kick, push off, and propel her body around the creature. The thing started to run after her, but a closer fleeing spectator caught the girl's eye and she went after him instead.

Mel was pretty sure her family had been sitting on the third bench from the top of the section. She darted up the ramp to the stands and erupted into a sheer state of pandemonium. From there she had a full view of the playing field and the carnage that was taking place. Bodies and parts of bodies littered the once-green turf. Figures clashed and struggled in a dance of death

that produced more spurts of crimson. It may as well have been a war, for more men in military uniforms had joined the police in fighting the Infected. The trouble was that the afflicted beings were winning. The nightmare below shocked Mel so badly that she felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. She had to lean against the wall to support herself as her mind attempted to take it all in.

The sound of a boy crying snapped her out of the daze. It was a voice she recognized.

"Paul!"

She stepped out into the bleachers but found no one on the third bench from the top. She called again and took the steps two at a time to get up there. Lo and behold, her brother was curled in fetal position on the cement floor under the bleacher. He was bawling his head off but appeared to be unharmed.

"Paul! I'm here!" Mel crouched down to him; he raised his head, wailed, and *clutched* his big sister as if she was the life raft that would keep him from drowning. "It's okay, it's okay," she said, but she knew it wasn't. "Where's mom and dad?" The boy kept crying. "Paul! Where's mom and dad?"

He lifted his head from her chest and managed to sob and spurt, "They're dead!"

Mel didn't want to hear that. "No, where are they?"

He pointed toward the section entrance. "Took dad... they..." and then he moved his finger down to indicate the body of a woman obscenely wrapped over a bench; her clothing was soaked in blood. Mel recognized the outfit.

"MOM!"

She left Paul under the bleacher and clambered down several benches to the dead woman. Her mother had been savagely bitten on the neck and shoulders; she lay face down in a pool of

blood and her one visible, vacant eye stared at nothing. Mel knew there was no hope for her. She suddenly felt Paul beside her as he grabbed hold of her waist.

"Mel, I'm scared! I'm scared!"

"I know, I am, too. What happened to dad? Paul, what happened to dad?"

"Crazy people got him, they were fighting and they dragged him away."

"Then he could still be alive! Come on, let's get out of here!"

"I'm not going out there!"

"We have to! We need to get out of the stadium!"

"What about mom?"

Mel allowed herself one more look at the corpse below. "We have to leave her, honey. I'm sorry, but we have to. Come on, stay with me now, all right? You'll stay right by my side?"

He nodded.

"Good. Let's go!" She snatched his hand and pulled him toward the ramp. Helicopters appeared overhead as men inside them fired guns at individuals on the ground. "Run!"

The ordeal that Mel and Paul went through to get out of the stadium was now a blur to the athlete. All she really remembered was Paul screaming his lungs out and gripping her hand so tightly that she thought she'd lose circulation. Several times they had to stop running and hide behind something to avoid being seen or attacked by Infected. In the end they joined a throng of civilians escaping with their lives. Outside of the arena was even more tumultuous as the couple encountered police and soldiers arriving on the scene. The Infected were so strong, mobile, and unpredictable that it was like trying to battle rampaging sharks on dry land. Paul couldn't look, but Mel witnessed ill-equipped and unprepared men massacred on the street. The ones that weren't killed shot at anything that moved—Infected or not. Later Mel reckoned that more

people might have been killed by friendly fire than by the zombies.

They ran down Nightmare Row to Hotel Harran with dozens of other survivors. The hotel staff had barricaded the front doors and was checking key cards and IDs of anyone trying to get inside. Only registered guests could enter. Luckily, Mel had her own key to the suite. For the rest of the night, people huddled together in the lobby and attempted to make sense of what had just happened. Some of them had been bitten but seemed all right. That wouldn't be the case in a few more hours. The bloodshed would continue inside the hotel as victims turned and were either murdered or thrown outside to fare for themselves.

Civilized behavior and simple rules of humanity vanished overnight.

*

A new and powerful wave of nausea enveloped Mel, knocking her out of the troubling memories.

No, not again! No, no, no!

She ran into the bathroom and made it just in time to throw up in the toilet. The heaving was painful and caused her vision to go yellow-shaded and blurry.

No, please don't let me turn, not now, not yet...!

Mel managed to flush the toilet, stand, and stagger back to the office, where she fell on the sofa with a thud.

18

5:00am.

She must have fallen asleep, for precious hours had passed when Mel opened her eyes. A faint hint of dawn was coming through the window, and she was still on Dr. Abbas' sofa in the office. The sickness attack had dissipated. After a pinch to her arm, she realized she hadn't turned yet.

I'm still thinking rationally. I think.

But she knew it wouldn't be long now. There was no way she was going to survive the day. Perhaps she was a freak of nature, but it was both a miracle and a curse that she hadn't lost her soul and become an Infected after, what?—thirty-two hours or thereabouts? No one she knew of had lasted that long.

Mel sat up, stood, and looked out the window. The park was still dark and covered in shadows, but she could discern the creatures moving about, looking for prey. She sighed and went back to the desk and retrieved her backpack from the floor. Her stomach told her she was hungry and her mouth and throat were dry. After opening another bottle of water from the fridge, she gulped down the lovely liquid and then pulled out the revolver.

I should just go ahead and do it.

Who was she kidding? The GRE hadn't shown up yet; maybe they would today, but by then it would probably be too late. If that was indeed Paul she had seen outside City Hall, then he was long gone. She would never find him. Even if she searched for her brother, the other Infected would surely get her. Again, it was down to—let the Infected kill her, or do it herself?

Well, that's a no-brainer, isn't it?

Fine. Decision made. She would shoot herself in the head, right there in the plush office. She would lie on the sofa, get comfortable, say a little prayer, and then blow her brains out. Easy peasy. Perhaps a flash of pain, but then eternal darkness and peace. She would never have to experience the horror of turning.

But *first... but first...!*

Mel eyed the bathroom. There was a shower in there. Hot water. Soap.

For God's sake, if I'm gonna frikkin' die, then I might as well feel clean and refreshed before I do it!

It made sense to her. Suicide called for a bit of pampering, right?

I'll shower, wash my hair, put on the terrycloth robe, and then do the deed. It'll be wonderful.

The prospect lifted her spirits. The candle had burned out, so she retrieved the second one and lit it. She then carried the candlestick into the bathroom and set it on the counter by the sink, purely for atmosphere. Mel shed her clothes, turned on the shower, waited until the water got warm, and got in.

It was heaven.

The bites on her leg and arms were red, swollen, and ugly. She washed them with soap, which burned quite a bit, but she didn't care. It would all be over soon and she wouldn't have to feel anything again. A horrendous purple bruise covered her left hip as a result of the earlier fall. The warm spray helped the soreness; in fact, it was so wondrous that she lingered in the stall for ten minutes, and then she finally turned off the spigot. There were clean towels in a cupboard. She put on the terrycloth robe and then checked out the medicine cabinet. What a find! Antiseptic ointment, bandages and Band-Aids, ibuprofen tablets, and other odds and ends. Mel

found a comb in a drawer and put it through her hair. She dressed her wounds, relished the steamy bathroom for a few seconds longer, and then opened the door.

An Infected stood in the office, slavering and snarling.

Mel screamed and slammed the door in his face. The creature pounded on the other side, roaring with frustration and displeasure.

Oh my God, what do I do, what do I do?

The damned gun and kilij were in the office, along with her backpack and anything else she might use as a weapon. The only window in the bathroom was too small to fit through.

Then it hit her—the Infected outside the door was bald, had a beard, a paunch, and, despite the blood on his face and clothing, appeared to be in his fifties.

It's Dr. Abbas!

Had he instinctively returned to his office because he knew it was something of a home for him? Or had he been in the building all along and just now wandered in?

The door splintered from the bashing. She had to do *something* or his bellowing might attract more Infected. *What? What?* This wasn't how she'd wanted it to end. It wouldn't be long before the door burst off its hinges. The monster was using his body as a battering ram, throwing himself at the door repeatedly. He tended to groan loudly just before each onslaught. And that gave her an idea...

Mel prepared herself and waited for the next grunt... and then she stood to the side and quickly opened the door. The Infected flew inside without the barrier halting his forward momentum. The former Dr. Abbas crashed into the bathroom and fell on the floor. Mel darted past him through the doorway and ran into the office. She grabbed the kilij off the desk just as the Infected pulled himself up and came charging after her. Mel swung the sword with all her

might and struck the beast several times, but he acted as if the blows were nothing. He was the worst and most ferocious Infected she'd seen. Frothy white mucus dripped from his mouth as his jaws snapped in a staccato rhythm. His eyes were the typical gold-yellow, but there was a rage behind them she'd never noticed in one of the diseased before.

Mel backed up, jumped on the sofa, and from the higher position was able to land a deep cut on the man's neck and shoulder. Blood spurted as if she'd punctured a balloon full of the red liquid. He rolled his right hand, fingernails out, and ripped her robe open. The athlete fought for her life, desperately trying to avoid another bite or be scratched by the brute.

Christ, how many slashes is it going to take?

She had hit him several times with the blade; each swipe sliced his clothing and made a deep incision across his chest and arms. One good whack forced him back—he had *felt* that one!—allowing her to leap off the sofa and move around the office for a better vantage point. The guy was spreading blood around the entire room with every move he made. He swung both arms at her, howling like the animal that he had become. In dodging the attacks, Mel tripped over her backpack on the floor. She fell backwards and thought that was the end of it. She was a goner. He came at her again, but this time she saw her opening; with all of her strength, Mel thrust the kilij into the Infected's abdomen as he threw himself upon her. The steel weapon went all the way through, causing the monster to holler with the volume of an elephant. He rolled off of her and managed to stand. The creature staggered backwards as blood gushed from the wound; the hilt of the kilij wobbled grotesquely in his stomach. Mel held her hand to her mouth, backed against the desk, and watched him fall to his knees. He struggled with the sword and failed to remove it. He cried out in anger and pain once more, and then toppled over onto his side.

Mel didn't move. Time stood still.

Is he dead?

She tentatively stood, stepped forward, and gazed at the former Dr. Abbas. His cloudy eyes stared straight ahead but he didn't appear to be breathing. Mel reached down, clutched the hilt, and drew out the dripping kilij. She wiped the blade on the man's clothing—*and his right hand shot out and grabbed her ankle!*

Mel shrieked and involuntarily brought the sword down on his arm, severing his hand. Then, in a state of frenzy, she repeatedly chopped at the Infected's body until it was a pulp of horrible red tissue.

Now you're frikkin' dead, you bastard!

Completely spent, Mel collapsed in the cushy chair behind the desk and sat there for minutes. Shell-shocked. Angry. Disgusted.

Minutes went by. Eventually she came back to the here and now, got up, and saw that the office door was wide open. Did it even have a lock on it? Had she completely ignored that essential safety measure?

I'm an idiot.

She exhaled heavily. Her plan was ruined. The idea of shooting herself in the comfort of the office, washed and clean, was now ridiculous. The robe was bloody and in tatters.

Screw it. Maybe I won't be killing myself after all.

Mel stood and went to her pile of dirty clothes. It was all she had to wear, so she put them on. Best to get the hell out of there. The sun was coming up, so the Infected would lose their enhanced abilities and become slow-walking and brainless again.

Maybe she *did* have a chance after all.

She gathered her things, put on the backpack, and went downstairs. Confronting the building's lobby again was another shock, for she had forgotten the piles of corpses that filled the space with the smell of putrid flesh. Mel pinched her nose and covered her mouth to keep her stomach from turning, and then she gingerly stepped over the bodies and headed for the front door.

But she couldn't go forward, for a little girl blocked the way. She was maybe five or six years old, wore a filthy, bloody, and torn dress, was terribly malnourished, had pale yellow eyes, and bore the sickening crimson smears around her mouth. Mel froze, but it was too late. The infected child started SCREAMING. It was an ear-shattering, high-pitched shriek that was beyond anything human. The tiny creature just stood there, her mouth open, screeching loud enough to alert any Infected within six blocks.

"No!" Mel shouted. "Shut up!" She drew the kilij.

God, I can't kill *her!*

"Stop! Stop!" Mel's eyes focused beyond the girl outside to the front of the building. Dozens of Infected had heard the alarm and were running toward City Hall. She was doomed!

Oh my God, oh my God!

She turned to go up the stairs again, but the girl stepped into the lobby to watch Mel's every move. The kid continued to scream with seemingly endless breath. Mel couldn't have the child follow her, otherwise the rest of them would know where she'd gone and hunt her down. She had to shut that girl up! Throwing compassion to the wind, Mel faced the creature, ran at her, and body-blocked the screamer so hard that the child fell backwards out the door and rolled down the steps. By then, though, the other Infected were seconds away from entering the building. There was no time to run for the stairs—they would see her and surely give chase. If

that happened, it was all over. Frantic and desperate, Mel moved away from the door and dived into the pile of bodies.

Ohhhhh, this is frikkin' revolting...!

She burrowed herself in the mess, digging through several corpses so that she was underneath them. At that point, a group of Infected entered the lobby. Mel heard their growls, sniffs, and smackings as they moved around the space searching for their prey. The athlete dared to open her eyes—she could barely see a bit of the room through twisted appendages. The main thing was not to move or make a sound. Would they still detect her, even if she was covered by people who were already dead? Yesterday when she'd hidden with smelly corpses, that seemed to mask her scent. Surely it would work today. The monsters stepped around the bodies, snarling with disappointment and even confusion, even moving right beside where she lay buried, but they didn't react.

My God, they don't smell me! They don't smell me! Be still, don't move, breath, nothingness, breathe, nothingness...

Time passed. She didn't know how long it took, but after the sun had fully risen and was high in the east, the Infected had slowed down, become less interested in finding her, and wandered outside.

Did pretending to be dead really fool them? Mel slowly dug her way out of the gruesome hiding place and stood. Her clothes were covered in human offal and blood. Her hair was matted in sticky, slimy goo. She wanted to cry. She felt degraded and humiliated.

But it had worked. And that gave her another idea. A theory. She had to test it to make sure, though, so she took the chance to step outside the building. The sun was bright and the day was hot. Several Infected meandered at the bottom of the steps and in the street. They were no

longer the ferocious, aggressive speed-demons of the night. Mel slowly descended the steps at the same pace as the creatures. They didn't look at her. She moved closer to them. A couple turned to her, but it didn't register that she was still healthy. *They ignored her*!

Mel walked out into the street and passed by several Infected. Some looked at her with curiosity and sniffed loudly. She stopped and let them. Then they moved on. She wasn't of interest to them.

Holy shit, if I cover myself in dead people's gunk, *then it works as a camouflage! I'm invisible to them!*

And that was a game-changer.

Mel went back inside the building and up the stairs to Abbas' office. His body still lay on the floor, so she picked up his feet, dragged him into the outer office, and tucked him behind the secretary's desk. Back inside, she sat in the cushy chair at the desk and pondered a new strategy. She possessed a new weapon against them, and, by God, she was going to use it!

The realization was very encouraging until a new wave of nausea and sickness collided in her abdomen. She doubled over and fell off the chair to the carpet.

19

8:00am.

The sickness attacks were definitely becoming more frequent.

Mel crawled to the bathroom to throw up. When she was done, she collapsed weakly on the tiled floor and simply wanted to die. After a few minutes, though, just as before, she regained her equilibrium and the room stopped spinning. Vomiting actually helped. She felt wretched for a while, but then she was always surprised that she felt better after waiting it out. She struggled to her feet and went back in the office.

How much time did she have now? She didn't want to think about it. The more she dwelled on the dilemma, the more hopeless her situation seemed.

But dammit, I just decided not *to kill myself! Come on, it's daylight now, get your ass moving!*

She went to the window to scope out the park. Infected were still out there, though fewer in numbers than before. There might have been more corpses lying here and there, but she wasn't sure.

Then her eyes focused on an object she hadn't noticed before. Not far from the swing set, lying in the shadows of some trees, was what appeared to be a very long, yellow blanket next to a big box, a crate of some kind. The easily recognizable letters on its side—GRE—were visible even at this distance.

Holy shit, that's not a blanket, that's an opened parachute! Is it the medicine? Is that the drop?

It must have come sometime after dawn. She had to get to it. No time to lose.

Mel bolted out of the office and went down the stairs three steps at a time. Back in the lobby, she paused just long enough to grimace first and then lie on top of the corpse pile. She rolled around a bit, covering her clothing and hair in even more bodily fluids. She got to her feet and thought it was ironic that she didn't have to worry anymore about HIV or any other contagious diseases since she already had the mother lode of viruses already surging through her system.

Once she was outside, she forced herself to slow down. Mel figured that Infected would notice her if she was running; she therefore painstakingly walked at an even pace around the front of City Hall to the south side, and then to the rear. The parachute and the drop was thirty yards away. Three Infected feeding on a body were between her and the crate, so she moved at a snail's pace across the park and came within several feet of the dining monsters. One of them—a woman—turned to look at her. She snarled and Mel froze. The woman stood and approached the athlete, sniffing and drooling. Mel decided to simply walk away, so she kept moving.

Go away! she thought to herself.

The creature growled louder and alerted the other two, but they didn't pay any attention to her. The woman followed Mel for several steps until the athlete turned to the monster and did her best to imitate an Infected's roar. The woman flinched, barked at Mel, but then shrank away. Mel waited a moment until the woman returned to the other two, crouched, and continued feasting on the dead body.

Mel continued on her way, glancing back a couple of times to make sure she was safe. As she got closer, she saw that the drop was indeed a large GRE metal crate. The limp parachute was still attached to it and lay across the grass. As she neared the object, Mel's heart nearly stopped—the crate had already been opened. The top was propped against the other side.

No... no...!

She couldn't help rushing to it; the crate was four or five feet high, so she had to stand on tip-toe to get a good look inside. It was full of straw and packing materials. She rummaged through the top quarter of the stuff, which was all she could reach, and found nothing. Mel then tipped the crate on its side and crawled in. She pulled out straw and padding and tossed it on the ground. Still nothing.

Dammit, they beat me to it.

Heartbroken, she got out and sat in the grass. Tears flowed freely as she cursed and beat the ground with her fists. How did other survivors beat her to it? Where were they hiding? They had to be nearby.

Angry now, she picked up the hunks of straw and, out of frustration, started tearing them apart. Under her breath she spat words she never normally used; she wanted to scream the swears to the sky, but that would only attract the monsters. Then something dropped to the ground. It had been lodged in the straw and simply fell out. Mel stopped ripping the stuffing and squatted to get a closer view.

It was a hypodermic, the automatic kind that you place against your arm and push a button; the drug then injects through your skin with a puff. Marked on the side of the hypo was the word ANTIZIN. One dose.

Oh my God!

She immediately removed her jacket, exposing her short-sleeved T-shirt underneath. Mel placed the tip of the syringe on her upper exterior arm and started to push the trigger... and then halted.

Paul should have it.

Her brother had already turned, therefore whatever she could do to help him out was the way to go. But, once again, she reflected that she had no idea how the drug worked. Did it cure the virus completely or was it only a vaccination to protect non-bitten people from getting it? Or maybe it only kept the virus from getting worse in people who already had it, but it didn't actually cure the disease. She wished there had been instructions in the crate; maybe the other survivors got them.

Crap, crap, crap! What do I do? I'm feeling fine right now, but that meant nothing. I could still turn any minute. But my poor brother... poor, sweet Paul... he's so helpless...

She had always looked out for him. Her parents had taught her from an early age that Paul, being autistic, needed her help. Mel had vowed to always be more than just a big sister—she was his protector.

Maybe another drop would happen that day. Maybe she could get to it first. Maybe she could find Paul near the school. Maybe the drug would help him.

More maybes.

Every goddamned decision is contingent on a frikkin' maybe. *So to hell with it. I'll save it—for just a while longer—until I find Paul.*

She stuck the hypo in her backpack and made her way back to City Hall.

20

8:30am.

Mel stopped in the lobby to rub some more blood and gore from the corpses on her clothes. She couldn't believe it was necessary, for it was the most stomach-turning thing she'd ever done in her life.

But you gotta do what you gotta do...

Then she headed for the street. She also hated having to walk so slowly; one of her faults was that she had been impatient her whole life. On the plus side of that tendency, Mel never procrastinated; she liked to get things *done*. She was a good student in school, made high marks, and was very organized. Whenever she needed to be somewhere, she was always early. And when there were tasks to be performed, she *did* them to get them out of the way so she'd have more time to do something else. On the negative side, she became annoyed by things that took longer than they should. She detested standing in line at the store or bank or post office, she became infuriated with Austin's rush-hour traffic, and she suffered no fools. Therefore, it was torture to walk at the speed of an Infected.

But you gotta do what you gotta do...

Back on the north-south street that formed the west border of City Square, the athlete headed toward the top corner and the avenue that jutted off to the high school. There were plenty of Infected out, and they all seemed to be moving in the same direction. It could almost be called a migration, although some of them simply stood still in the street as if they were in a trance. Others made lumbering steps in aimless directions. Most, however, were focused on the same route Mel was taking.

She figured that the best thing to do was to get close enough to the school and do a little reconnaissance. It was always smart to see what you're up against in order to fashion an informed plan of action. It would be crazy to rush in without intel.

So far the ruse of disguising herself as an Infected was working. Mel was actually starting to get used to the rancid smell. At first it had been truly horrible, but now she barely noticed the odor. If she made it that long, Mel knew she would easily enjoy another shower in Dr. Abbas' office. The problem was she'd have to put back on the same grungy clothes. If only she had her things from the hotel, but she supposed this wasn't a time for vanity.

When the athlete finally reached the park's northwest corner, she saw that the street on which the school sat was called Darwish Road. Mel had found that not all streets in Harran had names, especially the small, narrow ones in the medina. Apparently that was often the case in Arabic villages and towns. To make matters more puzzling, except for major avenues, minor streets that had names were marked only in Arabic. In New Town, however, English words often accompanied their Arabic counterparts.

She walked along Darwish and noticed that the number of Infected grew exponentially. Up ahead was a large crowd in the middle of the street. Was that in front of the school? She kept going, came to a major intersection, and crossed it as she hoped her camouflage wouldn't wear off. She couldn't imagine what the horde of Infected would do to her if they sensed someone who hadn't turned. Actually, she *could* imagine it; she just didn't want to go there.

Mel drew closer to the throng in the next block. It was as if they had gathered there for a reason, but did they even know what it was? She wondered if any other non-infected survivors had ventured anywhere near the school to learn more about how Infected behaved. Perhaps she was the first. Maybe she could learn something about them that could be useful. If she lived

long enough.

New Town High School was a brick and mortar two-story building that didn't look much different from the high schools in America. Mel guessed that it might have been built in the 1950s or 60s. There was nothing particularly unique about it. Eight wide stone steps led from the street to the four open front doors. The left half of the building was taller than the rest—was it a gymnasium? Did Arabic kids play basketball? Mel had no idea.

One would have thought that a major event was happening at the school, for dozens of Infected stood on the pavement outside the building and in the street. A hundred, maybe? The doors were open and she could see more of them inside. The boys she'd met had been correct—this *was* a nest! What did they call it? A "beehive." That's exactly what it felt like. What were they *doing* in there? She had to keep from snickering when the image popped into her head of Infected sitting at school desks and trying *learn something*.

The task at hand was to find Paul. Every Infected in New Town probably congregated here. She figured there were other nests around Harran; this couldn't be the only one. Mel didn't see her brother standing outside, so she had to brave the gauntlet and look for him in the building. It wasn't an attractive notion, but she had no other choice.

As she approached the stairs, several Infected turned to her, their golden eyes glinting in the sun. Drool and blood covered their mouths. Some had a habit of sticking out their tongues and licking their lips in an obscene, dog-like manner. She took the steps one at a time, pausing in-between to make sure her movements would go unnoticed. It didn't work, though, for each ghoul she passed took a whiff of her. As more of them turned to check her out, Mel suddenly realized how frightened she was. Her heart was beating a mile a minute.

Please ignore me... I'm no one, just another Infected...

She felt and smelled their breath around her. It was the odor of sewage. Being up close to them like this was totally unnerving. But none of them did anything. She reached the top step and breathed a sigh of relief. A woman next to her heard the exhalation and snarled and sniffed. Mel froze, refusing to meet her eyes. Could they tell that hers were not yellow? The woman continued to encroach on Mel's space, so the athlete growled back at her. The Infected tentatively flinched, allowing Mel to step inside one of the open doors and not give the creature more time for circumspection. But what she found in the school's entrance hall was even more disturbing.

Infected loitered, stood around, and rocked slightly on their feet in one position. The strange thing was that there were *so many of them*! They were packed like sardines in that relatively small foyer.

What are they doing*? What is it about this place that draws them here?*

As she pondered what to do next, Mel heard a bizarre noise coming from the left. It sounded like voices humming or moaning or *something*. It was a god-awful sound, not particularly menacing, but rather eerily meditative. Was *that* what they were doing? *Meditating?*

No frikkin' way.

The voices were really freaking her out. Nevertheless, Mel slowly began moving her way to the left, which obviously led toward the gymnasium. Whatever was going on in the school, the main event was in the gym. The Infected were pulled to the space for some reason. Two double-doors opened and closed as the monsters went in and out. The ones coming out seemed to have fresh, shiny blood on their lips and clothes. Had they turned the gym into a dining hall? The idea was so ridiculously sick that she almost laughed again. Another funny

thought crossed her mind—where were the hall monitors? Ha ha ha. If the situation wasn't so grim, she'd be thinking of all kinds of jokes about Infected and the school. Zombie teachers, coaches, and a principal. A zombie football team. Zombie cheerleaders.

Sick, Mel, really sick.

Now the question was whether or not to enter the gymnasium. The idea terrified her. She didn't want to know what was going on in there, and yet, she *had to see*.

The athlete pushed and snaked her way through the mass of diseased people and was ten feet from the gym doors when she spotted a familiar orange and white T-shirt. It was tattered, filthy, and smeared with dry blood, but Mel could see the Texas Longhorns logo plainly displayed on the front.

The face above the shirt was Paul's. Or, rather, it used to be.

Once again she almost blurted out his name but caught herself.

Don't attract attention!

Her brother was moving toward the gymnasium with very short steps. He, too, was rocking slightly on his feet as he moved. She watched him as he went through one of the doors, and then he was gone. Seeing his pale face, the golden eyes, and the mucus and blood around his mouth was heartbreaking. Tears started to run down Mel's cheeks; but she quickly wiped them away. She didn't want to take the chance that the Infected could somehow smell the salt water welling around her lids.

It struck her that Paul seemed to be much more complacent than the others. Was this due to his age or... maybe the autism? How did the disease work with that affliction? Did it make a difference? Did this make her plan more promising? Perhaps. Should she follow him? What the hell *was* her plan? She had seen the school, discovered that hundreds of Infected were inside,

and that some bizarre and other-worldly ritual was taking place in the gymnasium. Mel couldn't imagine what could possibly be going on in there, but whatever it was, she was sure that the space was the heart of the nest.

What was she going to do, go in, grab Paul, and lead him out by the arm under the very noses of the rest of them? That wasn't going to work. Her brother would make those unearthly throaty sounds that they all do and alert the others to his plight. They would all descend on her and tear her into tiny pieces of meat.

She needed a better course of action, something clever and unexpected. There was absolutely nothing she could do at that moment, but if she didn't turn in the next few hours, if she could hold off the disease for just a little while longer—then she might be able to do something worthwhile.

Mel glanced at her watch.

What the hell do I have to lose?

She turned around and meticulously made her way back to the front doors. The woman that had bothered her before was no longer standing outside, so Mel exited and descended the stairs. As she crept away from the building, an idea formed in her head. A plot, a strategy, a game play. It was risky and not just a little crazy, but again, what did she have to lose? If she was going to die or turn soon, then the least she could do was try to help Paul and give him the damned medicine.

Heaven help me. I'm gonna do it.

21

10:00am.

The sun was hot in the sky now, and Mel was afraid her perspiration would wash away the corpse camouflage. If only she could *run* to where she was going, she wouldn't have to be out in the heat so long. She would take the chance to do so if there weren't so many Infected on the street, but they seemed to be everywhere. Why some didn't go back to the nest during the day and others did, she didn't know. Their ways were still a mystery.

The trip back to City Square was uneventful except for one moment in which a trio of Infected approached her from the park. Three men that appeared as if they had only recently turned. They came so close, sniffing and snarling, that she was afraid her disguise *had* washed off.

One said, "<growl, snarl> *Fresh*! <grunt, gurgle>."

It was obvious they weren't very sure if she was one of them or not. Mel attempted to growl at them in return, but that only seemed to agitate the creatures. One man grabbed her arm—she was still wearing the jacket—and pulled her toward him. She pushed away, only to be clutched by a second monster. Doing her best to make threatening animalistic noises, Mel struggled with the man as the other two pawed at her. Their jaws started snapping as they moved in to bite her.

"No!" she shouted. She fought hard to break away from them and then drew the kilij. Unable to control herself, Mel thrust the blade into one man's stomach. He howled and fell to his knees as blood spurted and covered the pavement. Oddly, the other two went after *him*. They jumped on him like pigs in slop, pushed him to the ground, and buried their faces in his

belly. The sound of them slurping and chomping on the man's wound revolted Mel; she quietly slipped away from the feeding frenzy and kept walking toward City Hall. None of the other Infected on the street noticed her, but the more curious ones headed toward the bloody snack that was available on the sidewalk.

She was surprised at herself. Perhaps killing Dr. Abbas had given her more confidence in using the kilij, but in truth, she was more angry today than she was yesterday. Mel wanted to lash out at *all* of them, become a one-woman army, the ninja from hell, the American blonde with the deadly sword, the instigator of justice. Was it the disease that was making her feel so aggressive? Possibly. *Probably*. It was as if she was losing her humanity and didn't care. All the way back to the park, she cursed to herself in an attempt to release some of the rage.

When she reached the front of City Hall, Mel considered going inside the entrance hall and refreshening—if that was the word for it—her corpse camouflage. Didn't she need it? Several Infected wandered along the road and in the park around her. That last encounter unnerved her; it was better to be safer than sorry. But as she turned to head toward the front stone steps, a gunshot rang through the air. The pavement splintered next to her feet as the round ricocheted. Mel shrieked and instinctively hit the ground. Of course, her yelp alerted the other Infected. They jerked their heads in her direction and immediately started lumbering for her. Another shot. One of the Infected was hit—he convulsed for a couple of seconds and then dropped. Where was the shooter? Mel scanned the road and park but didn't see anything. Three shots fired in rapid succession—this time hitting a trio of Infected in their heads. Mel thought the noise was coming from the other side of Nightmare Row.

Of course. The high-rise apartment building. The Desert Oasis. There's a sniper up there. And, dammit, I look *like an Infected and I'm* walking *like one!*

She speculated he was probably someone who lived there, owned a rifle, and had been holed up in his apartment for two weeks, popping off Infected whenever the mood struck him.

Two more rounds slammed into targets. When another shot hit the pavement only inches away from her head—she could feel the heat and the spray of concrete shards—Mel jumped up and ran forward, toward the southwest corner of the park. To hell with replenishing the gore on herself. If she turned her back on the sniper to run in City Hall, he'd shoot her in the back. Didn't he know that Infected don't run in daylight? What was wrong with him?

Two discharges hit the sidewalk in front of her, forcing her to veer off onto the grass. She ducked behind one of the statues, but then she saw that her speed had caught the attention of all the other Infected in the vicinity. They were coming for her.

The sniper continued shooting. On the one hand, he was knocking off Infected, but on the other, he was firing indiscriminately. Couldn't he see she was hiding behind the statue for *cover*? Would *Infected* do that? Maybe the bastard was too far gone and crazed from being cooped up in the apartment for so long that he had lost his sense of reality. Who knew?

Before the Infected reached her, she had no choice but to bolt from behind the statue and run to the southern end of the square as fast as she could. She body-blocked one zombie that was in the way and kept going. Several of them screeched at her and attempted to chase her, but at their speed, she left them in the dust.

She made it to the southwest corner, the upper end of Nightmare Row. Now out of the sniper's line of sight, she slowed and halted to catch her breath. The plan to rub more gunk on her would have to wait. The next block was that touristy one, and visiting one of the shops she'd been in yesterday was an essential part of her scheme. Mel drank some of the water she kept in the backpack, wiped the sweat off her brow, and then crossed the intersection. She passed the

bank, and then the carpet shop where she had hidden for a while. The place she was looking for was just a little farther down the street. Where was it? She couldn't have dreamed up the shop, could she? Mel had experienced some hallucinations since being bitten, but she didn't think she had imagined an entire store full of paints, paintings, and what she needed—turpentine.

Sure enough, the artist supply store was just ahead on her left. Mel approached the open door, carefully looked inside to make sure she was alone, and then stepped inside. The place looked just the same as it had the previous night, except in daylight it was easier to browse.

Ha ha, a nice day to be open for business, right?

Mel grabbed one of the shopping baskets stacked by the entrance and started moving down the aisles. A couple cans of turpentine—check. Modeling clay—yes, surprisingly, they had it. She thought she'd scored big on that one. Mel also found some rubber bands and a few all-purpose cloths, so she stuffed those and the other items in one of the store's bags behind the counter. With the turpentine cans, the bundle was heavy. She considered pushing a shopping cart all the way back, but figured that would *really* attract Infected. The return trip would be stressful enough as it was—did she actually need two cans? Probably not. She reached in the bag and removed one container of turpentine and left it on the counter. Now the bag was much easier to handle.

Is there anything else I need?

She paused and thought about it. How was she going to get past the sniper? The other items she required were back in Abbas' office. She also had to get to those bodies in City Hall foyer to redecorate her "costume" with more blood and pieces of flesh. So what to do?

Mel started back up the aisles until she came to a display of white poster board in various sizes. Markers and pens were on the same row, and that gave her an idea. It was as good a plan

as any, save for her going in there to find the jerk and kick his ass.

She laughed to herself at the thought. *Maybe I should just write, "Up yours, asshole!"*

Instead, the athlete took a 22"x28" blank board and filled it with big black letters that read, simply, DON'T SHOOT! She rolled up the sign, threw a rubber band around it, and stuck it, too, in the shopping bag.

Time to leave. She went to the front door to see how much of the opposition was out there. Would a person carrying a bag—albeit, slowly, like them—be noticed?

Well, I'm gonna find out, aren't I.

She picked up the bag and carried it outside. The injury in her hip from falling on the car yesterday was really bothering her. Her feet were sore. She was covered in the remains of dead human beings. Mel was starting to feel wretched. Her energy was waning. Her head hurt and her body ached. Part of it was having to walk so slowly. Keeping in "character" was not her style and she was tired. Exhausted. Hungry. When was the last time she ate something? Strangely, she hadn't thought about it until just now. She was also unbearably hot. Even though she'd had water, the athlete knew she was probably dehydrated. There was no question that she had a fever. She'd been pushing herself to the limit for a day-and-a-half, and then there was all the previous stress from the two weeks prior in the hotel and the week before that preparing for the *goddamned stupid Games*!

It's all their fault, she thought bitterly as she trudged on, back toward City Square. *Just my luck, I'm gonna start to turn right here on the street. I'm gonna have to shoot myself right here on Nightmare Row...*

But despite her delirium, Mel made it all the way back to the southern end of the park. City Hall stood just where it always had. The Desert Oasis still faced the park from across the

road. Her head spun, and she questioned why she would otherwise think those buildings could go anywhere. Infected dotted the square, but so far none of them had noticed she was carrying a shopping bag from the only art supply store in Harran.

Christ, I feel awful.

She crossed the intersection and entered the square. A gunshot went off in the distance. The sniper was still at it, picking off targets in front of City Hall. Mel collapsed on a bench to rest. Her strength was ebbing fast. Should she get the revolver?

Maybe I should just let the sniper shoot me... No, I gotta go through with the plan. Get Paul the medicine. I've gone to all this trouble so far... gotta finish it...

Another shot. She watched as an Infected woman jerked from the impact and plopped to the street.

Get up, Mel. Just do it.

With a resigned sigh, she grabbed the sign she'd made, stood with great effort, and continued the trek up the west side of the park. The shots were much farther apart now—maybe the guy was growing weary, too. Maybe he practiced his shooting only at certain times of the day.

But as she approached City Hall's foregrounds with the statues, the sniper started firing again. His average hit record was two Infected out of four tries. To him it was a game. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. Mercy killings or murder?

At least he's not a perfect *shot!*

Mel removed the rubber band and unrolled the sign. It was awkward trying to hold the bag in one arm and grasp either end of the poster to display it. The discomfort in doing so made it even more difficult to walk slowly toward her goal.

DON'T SHOOT!!

She marched forward. The gun fired and an Infected twenty yards in front of her fell. She didn't stop. Mel squinted at The Desert Oasis and thought she might have seen a little smoke from the discharge somewhere around the twentieth floor. She didn't know how tall the place was; twenty-four stories, maybe. The recoil echoed through the square again as another zombie dropped. The guy's aim was getting better. She kept walking.

Finally, she was in front of City Hall. Mel was afraid she would drop and spill the bag's contents, so she put it on the sidewalk and held the sign with both hands over her head.

Do you see me, you bastard?

Silence.

An Infected man twenty feet away from her became curious and started lumbering her way. Mel stood as still as a statue, but she didn't think she'd be able to withstand the heat and her own sudden frailty for another minute.

Still silent.

The creature came within six feet, sniffing loudly and snorting. He was going to alert more of them if he didn't shut up.

A gunshot took him out. He fell on the pavement directly beside her. Mel, still holding the sign, closed her eyes and waited.

Nothing.

She peered around the sign and looked at the high-rise. In a window near the top of the building, a flashlight blinked on and off several times. A signal.

I see you.

It had worked. Mel rolled up the sign and stuck it in the bag. She gave a little wave at

the structure, turned, and walked to the front doors of her destination.

But an unfamiliar noise—one she didn't expect to hear again—crept forward from some distance down Nightmare Row.

A running engine.

She squinted toward the direction she had come, and, sure enough, there was a man rising slowly on a motorcycle, followed by another vehicle. Men walked alongside, taking the street as if it was theirs. Mel stepped in the door of the entrance hall to stay out of sight, but she desperately wanted to see who they were. Was it help, finally, on the way?

Unfortunately, the athlete's legs faltered; she dropped the bag, and leaned against the wall for support. She didn't know how much longer she could take the up and down pattern of the virus attacks.

Oh, Lord, I don't want to be sick just when the cavalry arrives...

The motorcycle wasn't far away now, and Mel also heard occasional gunshots. She edged her head around the open door and saw the newcomers weave in and out of the labyrinth formed by abandoned cars and trucks on the road. Mel counted seven of them on foot, and as they came closer, she understood the harsh truth that the bikers were not any kind of help.

Far from it.

Each man looked like a soldier, but a very unfriendly one. They wore flak jackets and gas masks. It was difficult to discern if they were Harranites, although Mel suspected they were. Each man also carried a big gun and targeted Infected as they moved along, idly picking them off.

They were members of one of the gangs from the Slums. Thieves. Pirates.

What were they doing? Just out for a nice excursion to kill some zombies and rob some

survivors? There was no question they were dangerous.

She could now make out the other vehicle that trailed behind the motorcycle. It was a three-wheel tuk-tuk, or auto rickshaw, the kind Mel and her family had ridden in when they'd gone on a sightseeing tour of Harran. It was probably the only other kind of vehicle besides a motorcycle that could weave through the obstacle course of derelict automobiles. A trailer was hitched to the back of the tuk-tuk; from where Mel sat, it appeared to be a cage on wheels.

What, have they captured some Infected? They gonna start a zoo?

But as the motley troupe moved onto the road in front of City Hall, Mel had a better view of what the gang wanted to parade for anyone who might be watching. Inside the cage were two girls—not too young, but not adults—who appeared to be alive and non-infected. Even at a distance, their faces betrayed their distress. They were prisoners, most likely taken from the street.

Mel's eyes may have shot to the girls first, but the true horror of the gang's activities were displayed on two posts that occupied the rear of the cage's roof.

Two human heads, one on each spike. And—

Oh my God...

—she recognized them. The one with the white hair and beard was Ismet, the old man who'd been the leader of the Harran police survivors. The other one belonged to the younger man she had spoken to first at their barricade.

That realization drew Mel back to the girls in the cage. She identified them now as well; they were the two young women she had seen in Ismet's group who might have been her own age. One of them had said, "Hi," to her. Ismet's granddaughters, perhaps?

She didn't know the details, but she could guess. The gang demanded something from

Ismet's people, or they were stopped at the blockade and didn't like it. Whatever. However it started, Ismet's people lost. The gang most likely killed everyone except for the two young trophies they were taking back to the Slums. And now that she had thought about it, Mel spotted two suitcases strapped to the back of the bike. Most of the men wore bulging backpacks. They were full of stuff that was worth something in a black market trade. Weapons, clothing, food. Ismet's enclave had been pillaged.

We're back to frikkin' medieval times, Mel whispered. Those poor girls. She wasn't sure what would be a worse fate—becoming the gang's playthings or falling to Infected.

The entourage was now directly in front of City Hall. Surely they weren't planning to drive onto Darwish Road! Even possessing assault rifles wouldn't save them from the horde of Infected at the school.

Before the lead rider indicated where they were going next, a shot rang out; the bike swerved erratically and crashed into an abandoned sedan. The gang member had been hit!

But who...?

The sniper. He'd done it.

Another loud discharge and a second man fell. The gang shouted to each other in Arabic. One of them pointed to the Desert Oasis. The sniper fired, but this time he missed. Big mistake, for now they knew where he was. Each man—the tuk-tuk driver, too—stormed the high rise like a SWAT team, blasting down the front door and disappearing inside.

The girls were left in the cage with no one guarding them.

Oh, don't tell me I have to... really?... I *have to do this?*

Even though she was woozy and felt weak from her excursion down the road, Mel got up, ran down the steps, crossed the lawn, and sprinted into the street. The girls saw her, jumped to

their feet, and grabbed hold of the bars. Mel put a finger to her lips as she approached, and then whispered, "Be quiet and I'll see what I can do."

The cage was secured by a padlock on the door. Mel drew the kilij, raised it above her head, and slammed it down hard on the metal. All that did was create a loud clang. She tried again, this time angling the sharp edge of the blade for maximum contact. The hardware sparked. At the same time the three young women heard gunshots coming from the apartment building.

"We saw you yesterday," one of the captives said.

"My name is Mel." The athlete swung the sword again. More gunshots, this time emanating from a higher floor. The sniper's twentieth floor window suddenly burst outward with a loud report and a human figure hurled into the air. The man screamed as he dropped to the pavement with a horrible *thump*.

The sniper was dead.

"Hurry," the second girl said.

"I'm trying!"

One, two, three more times with the kilij—and the lock dropped off. Mel opened the doors and the two girls got out. Their clothes were a mess but they seemed to be otherwise in good shape.

"Thank you," one said.

"You're welcome."

Then, without another word, the girls ran toward Nightmare Row. Maybe some of their people were still alive after all. Mel let them go. She dashed back to City Hall and entered the building just as the gang emerged from the Desert Oasis. When they discovered that their catch

had escaped, the men yelled at each other. One of them shouted some orders and the gang split up *to look for their quarry*. He pointed to various buildings in the vicinity, including City Hall.

After all she'd been through, Mel couldn't let them find her. If she hid back in Dr. Abbas' office, they might. She eyed the piles of bodies again. Should she...? *Oh my God, it's so horrible!* But it had worked for Infected, why wouldn't it do so for healthy people?

She *really* didn't want to do it again, but she had no choice. They'd be inside in seconds. Mel left her bag of supplies behind the closed door, held her breath, and once again squirmed and slithered into the mound of death. Mel found a comfortable position—if lying between rotting, messy dead people could ever be called comfortable—and waited.

The two men reached the open door and simultaneously shouted, "Ewwww!" as if they'd come upon a sickening sight—which they had. The Arabic curses flew between them. Mel couldn't understand a word, but she got the gist. They weren't going in *there*! The men immediately turned back and went away.

When Mel thought it was safe, she crawled out of the mass of twisted arms and legs and watched the gang eventually give up on their search. One man remounted the bike, the tuk-tuk driver fired up his ride, and the men turned around. After they disappeared down Nightmare Row, Mel breathed easier.

Nevertheless, the twinges of an attack had been teasing her for the last several minutes. She picked up the shopping bag and tried to make her way across the entrance hall, but the nausea and yellow vision came on strong, as she knew it would. She was beginning to recognize the various stages of the attacks. This was going to be a bad one.

22

12:00pm.

It was imperative that she get to Dr. Abbas' office, especially his bathroom. She had to leave the bag behind on the floor in the stairwell entrance.

I'll come get it when I feel better... and if I don't ever feel better, then it doesn't matter anymore... There better not be any frikkin' Infected up here...

Mel struggled to climb the stairs, holding the rail with both hands. Her vision blurred and the steps doubled in number. Everything glowed with yellow halos. She told herself these were more hallucinations, but that didn't make them any less frightening. The cramps in her stomach ultimately overcame the resistance she was putting up, and the athlete vomited in the stairwell. When the heaves ceased and the dizziness subsided, the stairs had resumed their normal appearance, and yet she was only on the landing in-between the ground floor and the first floor.

Christ, this is frikkin' horrible...

She continued upwards, pulling her body up a step at a time by clinging to the hand rail. Now the walls were closing in on her. The stone staircase became distorted, as if she was looking at it through a prism. Her head pounded with a severity that approached the pain level she was experiencing in her abdomen.

Second floor.

Oh, my God...

Coach Barnes would tell her she could do it. She *knew* she could do it. She just didn't want to.

One more floor, come on...

Her coach always said, “If you don’t even *try*, then you’re worthless.”

Well, I am *trying!*

“But not hard enough.”

It’s really hard, coach...

Was he there with her? She never saw Coach Barnes again after the night of the parkour race. How could he be?

“Come on, Wyatt, climb the frikkin’ stairs!”

His use of that word made Mel smile, and then a tear formed in one eye.

Okay, coach. I’ll frikkin’ try.

The athlete lifted her right foot and pushed with her leg and pulled with her arms. Then the same thing with the left foot. Again. One more time. Again. The vertigo was mind-numbing. She thought she might die before she would turn.

The urge to throw up again built in her stomach. The first twinges of the spasms were hammering nails into her organs.

Just a little farther...

Push. Pull. Step. Breathe.

Mel was certain she would pass out before reaching the third floor. A ringing in her ears grew louder and she thought she’d scream. At least she hadn’t encountered any Infected.

Third floor landing.

Home free...

She staggered down the hall and burst into the Harran Commission of Health outer office. Dr. Abbas’ body was where she had left it. Frantic now, she tugged on the main office door, propelled herself inside, and *crawled* to the bathroom and the toilet.

When she was done, completely spent, Mel managed to pull herself to a standing position, run some water in the sink and splash it on her face. She shut it off and tumbled out of the bathroom and onto the sofa, where she sank into a dream state of floating memories.

*

It was the last Friday night, nearly two full weeks after the Saturday massacre at the stadium. Mel was sitting with Paul in Suite 420, waiting until he fell asleep.

Her mind and body were overloaded with stimuli and stress. The survivors and their ad hoc Guard had been stuck in Harran Hotel for thirteen days. Food was scarce. The water from the faucets wasn't safe anymore. Tensions were high. Everyone was miserable. More disturbing was that on Wednesday and Thursday nights, Infected tried to get inside. They seemed to be getting smarter about it. The breach in the loading dock door was attacked again, and the Guards had fought all night keeping the creatures out of the loading bay. Once sunrise diminished the Infected's strength and speed, the survivors were able to close up the hole again. But it wasn't foolproof. Emil was certain that the sabotage was being caused by gangs from the Slums.

"They want stuff we have and we don't want to give it to them," he explained.

Around mid-week, the Guard had discovered the existence of a group of Harran citizens that were determined to take back their city in any way possible—by looting, stealing, and killing. They were other survivors that lived in the Slums and made excursions to other districts to spread their own brand of terror, as if the Infected weren't enough to deal with. Emil was right. They were a criminal gang of thugs.

Now it was ten o'clock at night, and all of that was on Mel's mind as she watched her brother. Although he was fast asleep, he often tossed and turned and cried out in the night. *His*

nightmares will probably follow him for the rest of his life, she thought.

When she was sure he was quiet, Mel got up from the floor—Paul insisted on pulling the sheets and blankets on the carpet and sleeping on the floor instead of in the bed; he felt safer there for some reason—and went to the bathroom to get ready for bed herself. Although she couldn't drink the water out of the spigots anymore, she could wash her face with it. Mel looked in the mirror and noted the dark circles under her eyes. Not enough rest. Too much strain. When would help arrive? Was it true about the GRE sending medicine? The radio announcer had said it might be tomorrow—Saturday—or the following day. How many survivors in the city had heard the message? Would there be a desperate run on the drugs, so much so that there wouldn't be enough to go around? Most of all... when would they be able to *go home*?

An explosion somewhere in the building rocked the floor.

"What was that?" Paul cried. He sat up, wide-eyed and frightened.

Mel rushed out of the bathroom, put on her jeans, a top, her sneakers, and a windbreaker. "I don't know. Stay here. Lock the door." She took her baseball bat and went out to the hallway. Other people had heard the noise, too.

"Anyone know what that was?" she asked.

No one had a clue, of course, so Mel led the way down the stairs. When she got to the second floor landing, she heard shouts and screams below.

"Sounds like trouble," one person said, refusing to go further. Mel continued to the ground floor. She burst out of the stairwell to find Emil and another Guardsman fighting off four night-enhanced Infected in the lobby. Mel rushed to their aid and slammed the bat into the back of one of the creatures. That gave Emil the opening to club the guy full on the head. Mel moved to one of the others, but she still hadn't developed the knack to *kill* them. She did, however,

disable the monster by seriously damaging his ribcage with a side swipe of the bat. He went down and was permanently put out of action by the second Guard. Two more to go.

When she heard the banging, Mel looked up and saw the throng of Infected outside in front of the doors. A mob of them. They beat their hands and fists on the windows, intent on getting inside and wreaking havoc. Mel knew the glass wouldn't hold much longer. How had they organized so well? They had never attacked in such a great a number before. More survivors came down the stairs; even the non-Guards had weapons of some kind in their hands—sticks, dining room and kitchen knives, golf clubs—and were ready to join the fray if needed.

Mel helped Emil and the other man take down the remaining two Infected. Panting, Mel asked, "How did they get in?"

"The damned loading dock," Emil answered. "There was an explosion, did you hear it?"

"Yeah, what happened?"

"I don't know. I think our friends from the Slums must have set off something, allowing the Infected to get us. The less survivors there are in Harran, the more booty the gangs can get."

"That's crazy."

"Then they're crazy. The Infected couldn't have set off an explosion."

"Unless it was someone in here."

"There's that possibility, too..."

A few women came screaming out of the stairwell. "Help! They're upstairs!"

"What?"

"The building's on fire!"

"Infected! On the third floor!"

"The building's on fire!"

Mel gasped. "Third floor?" She bolted for the stairwell, despite Emil's call for her to wait. She ran up one flight and encountered two Infected on their way down. They growled and screeched as she swung the bat back and forth. It forced them to retreat up a few steps, but they were stubborn and wouldn't budge from there. Mel hit one of them hard on the side, but the other monster lunged for her. She side-stepped him and he fell past. The athlete hit him on the back and the creature tumbled down the stairs to the next landing. She then pushed and ran behind the first one and was up to the third floor before he could catch her.

They're moving frikkin' fast, though!

Mel stopped in the third floor doorway, turned, and slammed the bat in the Infected's face as he ran up after her. He, too, toppled and rolled down, granting her the opportunity to leave the stairwell and dash into the hallway.

It was full of smoke.

Through the haze she saw people fighting Infected with whatever means they had—and it wasn't pretty. Two of her hall mates had died bloody deaths and were being fed upon by three female Infected and a child. When they looked up and spotted Mel, two of the women shrieked and lunged forward. Mel aggressively swung the bat as if she was trying for a home run. She hit one woman, who crashed into the other one. Mel slipped by them—the thick smoke actually gave her cover—and she ran to Suite 420, the door of which, to her horror, was ajar.

"Paul?" The room was empty, but also filled with smoke. "Paul!" She started coughing. Her eyes burned and she found it difficult to breathe. "Where are you!?" The bathroom was empty. "Paul!" The sheets and blankets had been dragged along the floor toward the door.

Oh, no...

She had to find him. Mel took one more look around, saw her backpack, and put it on.

She had kept a few things packed inside for an emergency. This was as good a one as any.

The hallway was worse than before. She saw flames at the other end of the corridor and the smoke was much thicker.

"Paul!"

Where could he be?

She started to run toward the fire, but one of the familiar faces among the survivors clutched her arm. "What are you doing? Don't go that way!"

"I have to find my brother!"

"Well, he won't be there! Get downstairs!"

Maybe the man was right. Paul would have had the sense to leave and take the stairs. Surely he was already down there. Maybe someone helped him. But why didn't she see him earlier? Never mind, it's a big hotel. He had to be in the lobby or outside.

Mel rushed toward the stairwell but had to stop and fight two vicious Infected who collided with her and pushed her against the wall. Their teeth snapped rapidly, trying to get in close for a piece of flesh. Luckily, she held the bat crosswise in front of her with both hands. She summoned all her strength to push them away, but they came at her again. It became a reverse tug-of-war, with both creatures pushing toward her and Mel shoving the bat forward.

Snap snap snap snap...

The neighbor got behind them and pulled one monster off of her. Unfortunately, the Infected turned on him and bit him on the face. The man screamed and fell as the creature jumped on top and sank his teeth into the victim's neck. This caught the remaining Infected's attention—there was blood and flesh to be had, so he forgot Mel and shot toward his comrade's quarry to share it. Mel jerked away and ran to the stairwell.

The volume of smoke had increased, causing her to cough more as she went down. A fight spilled out of the second floor and onto the landing—three Infected and two survivors, who had been bitten but were struggling to stay alive. Blood gushed from a wound in a survivor's neck. Mel hit one creature with the bat. The other two turned on her, allowing the two survivors to escape.

Great, just leave them with me, why don't you?

She swung the bat like a mad person—she was at her wit's end with fear and worry about her brother. Mel was operating on pure adrenaline and intuition. The bat struck whatever part of the Infected that happened to be in its way. She slammed it down on them repeatedly until some other survivors appeared on the stairs from above.

"I think they're dead!" one man shouted as he ran past.

He was right. She had killed them. Mel snapped out of the frenzy and joined the others descending to the ground floor.

The lobby was chaos. Two of the big glass windows had been shattered and Infected were pouring in. Remaining Guards desperately tried to hold them off but it was losing battle. Emil was on the floor, bloody and unmoving. It was over.

She turned and ran with the others to the dining room with Infected in hot pursuit. Through the spacious kitchen was a way out to the street, an employee's entrance. There was no sign of Paul. Four Infected, however, were in the kitchen. Mel and the others started throwing pots and pans from the counters at them. People grabbed knives and long forks and did their best to clear the way. The Infected easily overcame several survivors, but Mel kept swinging the bat, hitting anything that moved—and suddenly she was outdoors. Dozens of people were on Nightmare Row, crying and screaming. She looked up and saw that the hotel was fully ablaze.

Had Sefu done this? He had threatened to set fire to the building if Infected managed to get in.

"Paul!" she shouted as she frantically searched among the crowd. He was nowhere in sight.

Then she heard it.

"Mel!" The voice had that hysterical edge to it that sounded like her brother.

Was she imagining it? There was so much noise; screaming, fighting, total confusion. Wait... was that a flash of orange? Paul's orange and white University of Texas T-shirt! It was there and then it wasn't.

"Paul!"

Even with the illumination from the fire, the street was dark and full of smoke. She ran from person to person to get a closer look at them, but each one was just another scared survivor. Then she grabbed hold of the wrong figure—she was face to face with an Infected, a man with golden eyes, a bloody mouth, and oozing sores all over his face. Mel screamed and pushed away, but he locked his hands around her left arm, brought his head down, and—

OWWW! NO!

He bit her. She jerked her arm from his grasp, but he kept coming. He prepared to bite her again and would have if Sefu hadn't appeared and shot the bastard with a handgun. The bullet perforated the monster's head and he fell to the street.

"Oh, God, thank you, thank you, Sefu!"

The Congolese man looked at Mel and said, "You're bitten."

Mel examined her arm through the rip in her windbreaker sleeve. She was bleeding profusely from several jagged puncture wounds.

Sefu pointed the gun at her.

"Sefu! Wait! No!"

"It's best this way, Mel. You don't want to turn and be like them."

"Please, no, I need to find my brother! Please, don't kill me. Give me a chance!"

An Infected materialized out of the thick smoke and crashed into Sefu's back. The thing sank his teeth in the Congolese athlete's neck and ripped out his throat in one, ferocious tug.

Mel ran. It was all she could do. Get away from the hotel. Staying there was certain death. She ran through the darkness and out of the smoke, where she could breathe again. A half-block from the building was a burned-out storefront. It had been that way for a couple of weeks, for Mel had seen it previously when she was on patrol. The place was blackened and empty. Maybe a perfect place to hide?

She looked at her watch. Approximately 11:00pm.

Poor Paul...

Mel went inside, stepped over fallen timbers, went deep into the derelict structure, settled in a second room. There, she found the remains of a desk and counters. As long as no Infected followed her in, it was as good a place to hide as any. She removed her windbreaker, which was torn and bloody on the sleeve. Mel then took the bottom of her own T-shirt and ripped a piece from the mid-drift. She wrapped it around her arm and held the makeshift bandage tight. Then she sat on the floor, curled her knees to her chest, and wrapped her arms around them.

Mel kept recalling her brother's terrified scream—if it was really Paul's—over and over as the battle raged in the street.

*

She awoke with a start. Had she heard Paul cry for help? No. It was her dream. Or memory. Whatever. She was on the sofa in Dr. Abbas' office. What time was it?

Crap, it's mid-afternoon.

She had passed out from the sickness attack. But now, of course, she felt better. Once again, Mel pinched herself. She hadn't turned. She was thinking clearly.

The athlete stood, got a water bottle out of the fridge, and drank it down. She couldn't think about the hunger. Instead, she focused on her original mission. She had already gathered the tools she needed. Where were they?

Oh, yeah.

Mel went out to the stairwell and down to the first floor landing where she had left the bag from the artist supply shop. She returned to the office with it and laid the contents on Abbas' desk. She then went to the fridge, took the six-pack of beer bottles, and emptied each one in the sink in the bathroom.

Emil's instructions came back to her clearly.

The turpentine went into the empty bottles and soaked the cloths to serve as fuses. She fashioned corks out of the modeling clay, which were then used to secure the cloths in the top of each bottle. She made three Molotov cocktails before she ran out of turpentine.

Hopefully that would be enough.

23

2:30pm.

Armed with the explosives, the butane lighter, and the kilij sheathed on her belt, Mel made sure she still had the clothes-line cord in her backpack and then picked up the empty canvas mail bag with the tie-ends and stuck it in, too. The revolver also remained safely in the pack. Then she went downstairs to re-apply the disgusting camouflage over her clothes and exposed skin. The athlete took a deep breath, shut her eyes, and rolled around on top of the corpses, making sure plenty of blood and pieces of flesh clung to her. Real thick.

I hope I never have to do this again.

The sun was hot and bright. Mel donned her sunglasses and hit the street. Infected populated the road here and there, but it was obvious that most of them preferred to stay indoors during the heat of the day. They "recharged" or whatever it was so they could be fast and vicious after dark. Mel didn't understand how it worked and didn't care. She had one thing on her mind now, and that was to get inside the school, find Paul, and lead him out of there. Would her plan work? She had no idea. It was crazy, to be sure, but sometimes the most insane plots were the best ones.

Mel gazed at the high rise apartment building on the other side of Nightmare Row, and then her eyes panned down to the pavement where the sniper still lay. In fact, two Infected were feeding on him at that moment. It was strange—the communication she'd had with him formed a sort of camaraderie with the gunman. She felt bad about him.

The laborious trek took her to the park's northwest corner once again. Peering up Darwish Road, Mel could see the congregation of Infected in front of the school. She found it so

bizarre how they instinctively banded together there. What were their thought processes? Were their brains simply going through the motions of pretension? She'd seen firsthand that they didn't *reason*, but they possessed some kind of intuition on where to go, who to attack, and what to eat. They were animals, pure and simple. The disease turned human beings into cannibalistic beasts. Walking sharks. Piranhas.

She reached the school and waited on the other side of the street to watch them for a moment. Paul wasn't in front of the building, unfortunately; she would have to enter the unholy place after all.

With a little luck, it's possible you can beat the odds. You never know.

Time to act. Mel crossed the road and mingled with the Infected. As before, some of them looked at her, sniffed, snarled a bit, but otherwise left her alone. She took the front steps one at a time and went inside the open doors. The profane chorale still floated out of the gym—moaning, groaning, and inhuman vocalizations that combined to create some kind of mantra for the diseased. It sent shivers down her spine.

Nevertheless, she moved through the crowd in the entrance hall and headed for the gymnasium doors.

The first overwhelming thing was the stench that assaulted Mel's senses. The gag reflex kicked in, forcing her to turn, cover her mouth and nose, and fight the urge to throw up. That would surely give her away!

Oh my God, it's horrible... oh my God...

She wished she had one of those hospital masks that covered doctors' and nurses' faces in operating rooms. What was it they rubbed under their nostrils when they went to the morgue? Some kind of pungent Vaseline? Well, tough, she didn't have any of that, she'd just have to grin

and bear it. There was no telling what kinds of bacteria were hanging in the air; the oxygen probably contained innumerable deadly pathogens. But she was already sick, right? What more could happen to her body that could be any worse? Mel willed her body to control the spasms; she opened her eyes and breathed normally through her mouth. That helped a bit, but it was still disgusting.

The second thing that stunned her was the sight of the gymnasium's interior. It was packed, wall-to-wall, shoulder-to-shoulder, with Infected. It was as if several hundred ants had been placed in a cigar box. Most of them stood in place and rocked on their feet. Some moved slowly, wandering around each other. Still others sat or lay on the floor as the rest stepped around or on them. It was a mass pulsating blob of former human beings. Nearly all were issuing throaty inflections, which created the unearthly requiem she had heard outside. What did it mean? Was this how they "slept"? Were they feeling pain? Or pleasure? They seemed to be in a bizarre trance.

Mel worked her way through the swarm. She couldn't help brushing against them, for there was barely room to move. The gym was a standard size, comparable to those in an American high school, and it even had basketball backboards and nets on opposite sides. Would she be able to find her brother in such a crowded fishbowl? He could be anywhere—or nowhere.

Her quest continued as she snaked around Infected, traveling slowly across the floor to the center. It was there that her mind was truly blown. If she thought the pile of bodies in the lobby of City Hall was unspeakable, then what she found in the epicenter of the nest was truly intolerable.

It was a mountain of corpses and body parts perhaps six feet high and twenty feet in diameter. No wonder the place smelled like hell's abattoir. Mel's mind couldn't comprehend

how many dead souls lay there, deposited like slabs of meat. Whole figures, as well as individual arms, legs, trunks, heads, hands, and feet... Even more atrocious was the fact that Infected squatted or sat on the perimeter of the heap, feeding to their hearts' content. It was the ultimate slaughterhouse.

But wait! What the...?

It was worse than she originally thought. There was actually a gigantic hole in the center of the gymnasium's floor. The base of the mountain of corpses was in reality in the school's basement and the pile was so high that it protruded through the hole and reached nearly to the gym's ceiling! That meant there were *hundreds* of bodies there.

Mel couldn't move for several minutes. She thought she might faint, but doing that would be a death sentence. Instead, she stared at the nightmarish tableau and silently prayed.

Give me strength... please... help me go on...

Almost on automatic pilot, she moved closer to the pit. Despite the horror of the scene, her curiosity was too strong. She had to see below, for Mel heard cries and screams coming from the basement. She inched her way to the edge of the hole and peered down. Her audible gasp nearly choked her.

The bottom of the basement was flooded with water, but the liquid was brown and red, contaminated with blood and offal and body parts. There were also several recently-bitten human beings standing waist-high in the muck, crying for help. Men, women, and even children in parents' arms, shouting for Allah and Mohammed and God and Jesus to save them. The expressions of fear and terror on their faces were too much to bear. Had the Infected bitten them and thrown them in the pit? Was it a "prison?" Mel couldn't comprehend what purpose the pit served, only that it was straight out of hell and beyond the capacity of her small, human mind to

fathom.

A nearby growl startlingly brought her to her senses. Mel hissed at the Infected in return, turned away, and continued the search through the mob.

You can't help the people below, she told herself. *Forget them, otherwise you'll go into shock.*

She probably already was in shock. Nevertheless, she forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand. Find Paul. Keep her mind on the goal and don't think about the poor victims in the basement. Move on. Just do it.

Mel also remembered to study the gym's layout. She noted where the emergency exits were located on the wall opposite of the entrance. They were big double doors with locking horizontal bars that you pushed to open, typical of the types of accesses in all schools. They led outside, probably to the side of the building. Two single doors on the wall behind one of the basketball backboards most likely went to boys' and girls' locker/dressing rooms.

This isn't going to be easy...

She moved forward, skirting around the stack of cadavers to head toward that side of the gymnasium. As she did so, she came upon two young Infected—teens—pulling on the arm of a corpse wedged in the middle of the pile. There was so much weight on top of the specific body they wanted that it was emerging ever so slowly, as if it was being birthed from the devil's womb. None of the adult Infected turned to help, so one of the teens growled at Mel and made incomprehensible formations of sounds with his tongue and lips—*words?*—in an attempt to get her attention. Did they want her to *help* them? Perhaps the teens had recently turned and still possessed a semblance of working brain functions.

What the hell... it'll reinforce my "cover"...

So Mel grabbed hold of the arm and tugged with the two teens. Why did they want this particular body? It appeared to be rather...old...and was putrid and bloated. A shoulder and head, facing down, popped out of the mass. One of the teens reached in and found the other arm. Slowly, surely, the three of them freed the man's body—for he *had* been a grown man. The body was still clothed, but the abdominal cavity had already been dug into. Where his vital organs had once been, now there was only blackened, rotting flesh and bones. But the skin on the rest of him was still present, as well as remnants of his clothing. Once the cadaver was free, the twins turned it on his back on the floor and dropped their faces into the man's otherwise untouched neck. Repulsed, Mel shuddered and stepped back. And then she recognized the watch that still adorned the corpse's left wrist. It was a silver Victorinox Maverick GS Chronograph with a unidirectional rotating bezel and tachymeter-scale dial.

The dead man was her father. His face was nearly unrecognizable from the distending skin and two weeks' worth of decay, but it was definitely him.

Before she involuntarily screamed, Mel pushed through the other Infected and hurried toward the doors leading to the dressing rooms. When she reached the wall, she collapsed against it and slid to the floor. Hiding her head in her knees, she sobbed as quietly as possible.

Should she do anything about it? Try to get his body out of there and bury it properly? Mel hadn't very well attempted to do that with her mother's corpse. She had left it lying on the bench in the stadium. The athlete had figured, *what's the use*, and that it was more important to get herself and Paul out of there. But here, in the Infected's nest, seeing her father's former self in mutilated, desecrated form, she had very different thoughts.

Several minutes passed, though, and the motivation was driven out of her by a new ball of anger that tore through her heart. She wanted to shout at the top of her lungs.

I hate you all! I hate... you... all...!

She was ready to draw the kilij, jump to her feet, and start slicing until they brought her down. It would be a noble way to go. Just stand and fight. Kill as many of them as possible. Sure. Why not. They'd killed her entire family. If she had to die trying to avenge their fate, then it was worth it.

But as had happened several times in the past twenty-four hours, just as she was about to give in to the fury, something brought her up and out of the raging despair.

There, lumbering across the floor in front of her, was her brother.

24

3:00pm.

Paul, like all the others, acted as if he was blind and seemed to be stepping aimlessly across the floor. Was he actually looking for something? Or was his brain telling him to "move" and he was simply acting on pure impulse? The expression on his face was one of blankness; but, in fact, there was something else Mel detected behind those golden eyes. Her brother was... sad. She recognized the slightly wrinkled brow that indicated he was upset or frightened or simply wanting his family.

His clothes were filthy. The University of Texas shirt was smeared with blood and grime. Paul's hands and fingers were raw; the skin had been—*torn? rubbed?*—off, possibly as a result of him attempting to claw his way in or out of something, or perhaps by using them as utensils to dig into bodies for food.

He had been bitten approximately the same time as she. Paul had obviously turned much sooner, being only twelve and not very strong. How much of his sweet personality was there left? Would he know her at all? She couldn't very well call out to him. Attracting any attention in the gym would surely jar the Infected out of their strange complacency and she'd be drawn and quartered like a medieval torture victim. Mel wanted to avoid that.

Which is why she brought the big mail bag.

She opened her backpack and removed the sack and the clothes line. Before Paul could get very far, Mel draped the items over one arm, stood, and followed closely behind her brother. There was really no ideal spot in the gym where she could implement her plan. The scheme was a huge risk, but she was prepared to end her life that very day.

If you don't even try, then you're worthless.

Coach Barnes' words echoed in her head as she dug into the backpack again to grab one of the Molotov cocktails and the butane lighter. She needed to create a diversion so the Infected wouldn't focus on what she was about to do. The cloth stuck in the bottle was still wet with turpentine, so she flicked the lighter, produced a small flame, and ignited the fuse. The speed with which the cloth burned surprised Mel, forcing her to throw the bottle before she'd had a moment to figure out exactly where it was going to go. The explosive sailed over the creatures' heads and fell somewhere in the center of the gym. She heard the glass break on the floor, followed by a *whoosh* as the flammable liquid ignited and quickly distributed around the Infected in its vicinity. The reaction was immediate. The monsters shrieked and became animated, many of them pushing away from the blaze, which spread on their clothing. She hadn't really intended to kill any of them, only distract them, but her action was doing both.

To hell with it...

She took the mail bag, opened the end wide, stepped behind her brother, and threw the thing over his head and pulled it down as far as it would go. The bag covered half of his little body. He started screaming and struggling, as his arms were caught inside the sack. Mel then took the cord, wrapped it tightly around his torso several times, and tied it off. This left five feet of slack, which she tied to her left wrist. Unable to move his arms, Paul was now trussed up inside the canvas bag. And she had him on a leash.

The Infected hadn't noticed, despite her brother's hollering. They were too busy panicking by instinct, moving away from the small area of the gym that was bright with burning bodies. The crowd pushed and shoved, almost knocking Mel and her brother to the floor. Being trampled was not on her agenda, so she fought back, held her ground, and reached in the

backpack for another Molotov cocktail. This time, she lit the cloth and aimed for the far basketball backboard. The bottle soared over the throng of former humans and shattered exactly where she'd intended. The explosion was louder than before, and the incendiary liquid covered a much larger area of the crowd.

Mel's earlier thought that the Infected in the gym were like ants in a cigar box was even more apt. When she'd been a child and didn't know better, Mel had once thrown rocks on an ant hill, which caused the insects to run around in a frenzy—their world was suddenly on the brink of disaster. That was what was happening here. The Infected stampeded over each other, not sure of where to go. Some had the presence of mind to head for the front doors of the gym, but there were too many of them. The mad dash became an avalanche of bodies as they tried to climb over each other.

In the meantime, Mel pulled the cord and led her brother toward the emergency exits on the opposite side. The Infected apparently didn't comprehend that those were a way out, too. However, many congregated on that side of the room, blocking her progress. A couple of them eyed Mel and the writhing figure in the mail bag. They heard his screaming. Something wasn't right, so they attacked her. One clutched her left arm, trying to figure out what the rope was for. She kicked him in the chest, knocking him down. Mel then drew the kilij and swung it at the second Infected, slicing the front of his shirt and drawing blood. She tugged the cord and rushed past the assailants with her brother in tow. Without sight, however, Paul toppled over a body and dropped to the floor. Mel stopped to help the struggling child.

"Get up, Paul! Get up!"

She finally had to pick him up and throw him over her shoulder. He was light enough, but Mel didn't think she could carry him too far because of his struggling.

A sharp pain in her right arm jolted her. She jerked it away from an Infected woman who had chomped down on her windbreaker sleeve, tearing it and breaking the skin.

"No!" Mel cried as she brought her hand back and then delivered a resounding backslap on the woman's face. The Infected snarled in anger, ready for a fight. She leaped at Mel, causing her to fall to the floor, bundle and all. Paul, inside the bag, shouted unintelligible yowls. The woman climbed on top of Mel, the drool from her mouth dripping in a string over the athlete's face. Her mouth opened, the teeth flashed... and Mel's fist slammed into the Infected's nose. Being stronger—at this time of day—than the woman, the athlete easily kicked the creature off of her and then assumed the dominant position. Three hard blows to the monster's face knocked the former Harranite unconscious.

The bag twisted on the floor beside her as Paul's legs kicked frantically below the bottom end.

"Paul! It's me, Mel! Can you hear me? Can you understand?"

She got up, ready to heave the bag over her shoulder again, but she saw that way too many Infected had gathered against the emergency exits. The throng was dozens of creatures deep. How could she get past them? Attempting to escape through the front doors was even more impossible as the beasts kept piling in that direction.

Time for another cocktail.

Mel pulled the last Molotov out of the backpack and lit the soaked cloth. This time, she hurled the bottle at the wall just above the exits. The blast unfolded over the Infected's heads, covering the multitude in flaming fluid and igniting their hair and clothing. The screeches of pain and fright were deafening, but Mel received the result she'd desired—the monsters moved away from the doors. The athlete grabbed her brother and pulled him to his feet.

"Come with me, Paul!"

She tugged on the leash and led him through the pathetic, burning horde. Mel felt the heat against her own skin and realized that the mail bag was on fire. Cursing, she threw Paul to the floor again and rolled him over to douse the flames.

"Sorry, Paul!"

She had to carry him; there was no other way. Mel picked up the bundle and rushed toward the doors. Her brother fought her like a wild boar, but she held on tightly and charged through the inferno. Mel's shoulder hit the horizontal locking bar, pushed it in... and they were outside in the open air on the northwest side of the school, opposite from where she had entered.

Several Infected stood in her way. Alerted by Paul's aggressive noises inside the bag, they realized that Mel was not one of them—yet. They shambled toward her, teeth glaring and fingernails outstretched. Nothing to do but drop Paul on the pavement—*oomph*—and draw the kilij. Just in time, too, for one Infected was within touching distance when she thrust the point of the blade into the creature's abdomen. Mel had learned quickly that this was the easiest and most vital target. She swiftly pulled it out and swung it at the next one, who had stepped up close enough to bite her. The sharp blade imbedded in the beast's upper arm, nearly severing it. With her other hand she pushed the man away and turned her attention to the others. They seemed to sense that the un-Infected in front of them was a threat; they kept their distance, but still blocked her way to the street. Mel held the sword perpendicular to the ground and swished it back and forth. The Infected retreated slightly, growling and hollering at her with indignation.

"Get up, Paul!" She jerked the rope, but her brother just lay on the pavement, kicking and thrashing. "Damn it!"

She squatted, wrapped her left arm around the package, and hoisted it over her shoulder

again; her right hand was still free to swerve the kilij. She bolted forward, ready to cut down anyone or anything in her way. The blade struck one of the Infected that slithered too close—it punctured his cheekbone and brought him to his knees. Mel tugged the sword out, followed through to the right, and hit another monster that attempted to sideswipe her. The way to the road was clear now, so she ran with Paul's weight unhelpfully affecting her speed.

Mel crossed Darwish Avenue, laid Paul on the sidewalk, and stopped to survey the scene. Smoke poured from the school's doors and open windows—the flames were spreading. Infected stumbled out the front in droves. Many were burning and screaming, but they were also still very active and dangerous. Best to get away from the building before she completed her goal.

Mel decided to head farther along Darwish rather than cross in front of the school to return to City Square. She bent down, pulled Paul to his feet, and led him by a short leash again. He fought the custody as if he was a dog, but eventually he went along behind her, moaning and groaning in confusion and pain.

"It's almost over, Paul," she said. "It won't be long now."

25

3:30pm.

Mel led Paul into an abandoned coffee shop storefront some fifty yards away from the blazing school. Infected continued to pour out of the building as she watched from the open doorway. She had struck a blow at the heart of the disease, and yet she was also well aware that the school wasn't the only nest in Harran. They were all over the city-state. With each passing hour, another person would turn and become a zombie, ready to inflict the virus on others. She felt bad about the Infected she had burned, but she'd had no alternative. Were they beyond hope? Possibly. There was the medicine, but she had no idea if the ANTIZIN would work.

Might as well get to it and see if it does.

Mel retrieved the one hypodermic syringe from her backpack and laid it on the floor. She then wrestled her brother to the ground, the bag still over his head. She could hear his jaws snapping inside. If she set him free, he would only bite her. Not that another wound would make much difference, since she now had a new bite on her right arm, inflicted by that damned Infected woman in the gym. It wasn't as terrible as the other two lesions, but the creature's teeth *had* broken the skin.

"Okay, Paul, you might feel a little prick, but hopefully this will make you feel better," she said. Mel took the syringe and turned the boy around on his stomach. She lifted the bottom edge of the mail bag, exposing his rear end. Her poor brother had long ago soiled his breeches. She winced as she tugged the waist of his pants down a little to expose the top of a dirty cheek, and then she jabbed the syringe against his skin. The hypo made a *fffppp* noise as the drug injected into Paul's bloodstream. When she was done, Mel covered him up and left him alone.

She noted the time on her wristwatch. He continued to wiggle and roll inside the bag, moaning and groaning and spitting.

Mel reached for the remaining water bottle in her backpack and took a swig. The liquid was warm from the sun, but it still felt soothing going down her throat. There wasn't much left. More could be had at Dr. Abbas' office, but she wasn't sure about a return trek. The prospect of heading back that way, past the school, and then navigating the square and the Infected... she simply couldn't do it. Not now. She was exhausted. Angry and sad. Frustrated and...

Oh, no...

The sickness attack hit her with such force that she gasped in pain. Her abdomen riled in protest as the cramps radiated from her intestines to the rest of her internal organs. It was nausea of the highest degree. The room spun and her vision blurred and turned yellow. She would vomit in seconds, but Mel had the presence of mind not to do it there beside Paul. The athlete forced herself to crawl across the floor, avoiding broken tables and chairs. Two badly decayed corpses lay by the counter; she hadn't noticed them before. The smell there couldn't be any worse, so she inched her way to them. She heaved violently, as if her insides themselves were coming up through her esophagus. The ordeal seemed to last forever, and it left her terribly weak. Mel rolled away from the mess and moved like a worm back to her brother. He continued to squirm as his fingernails scratched the inside of the bag.

"Paul. Stop. Please, stop." She sounded feeble because the rancid fluid she'd discharged had burned her throat. "Paul, it's Mel. Stop."

Miraculously, her brother reacted. He continued to vocalize his unhappiness, but he ceased fidgeting. Had he understood the words? Recognized her voice?

She wanted to reach out to him, hold him, pull him close, but the floor suddenly went

topsy-turvy and she dropped into a dark abyss of unconsciousness.

*

When Mel's eyes opened, her vision was still blurry. The pain in her belly was still strong. How much time had passed? She was still thinking clearly—enough—but the attack hadn't abated. Every nerve in her body was on fire, her muscles ached, her head pounded with jackhammers, and her stomach was a black hole of anguish.

Oh, God, I'm turning...

That had to be it.

She felt something brushing against her leg. Mel squinted and saw that Paul, still inside the bag, had snaked over to her, and he was trying to bite her through the canvas!

"Paul, no, stop."

Her brother growled and snorted.

She looked at her wristwatch, surprised to see that she had been out for an hour. Wouldn't the medicine have taken effect? Had she given the drug enough time? Or was it useless? Paul didn't show any signs of improvement. The injection hadn't worked. Maybe it *was* only a vaccination to prevent the virus from acting in an un-infected person. For those already turned, the medicine was a waste of time.

She didn't have the strength to move away from the bag.

Fine. If you want to nibble on my leg, go ahead. Good luck getting that bag off.

Her thirst was unbearable. Perhaps she could drink the rest of her water. No need to save it for later. There would *be* no later.

Mel thought the backpack was lying a foot or two from her head. She raised her arm and reached for it. The fingertips brushed an edge, so she had to squirm closer. Trying to move

again was painful, but she stretched and gained a couple of inches along the floor. Her fingers curled on a corner of the pack, and she managed to pull it near. Once it was beside her, the athlete reached inside—but her hand touched the gun.

Ah. My salvation.

She pulled it out. It was heavy and cumbersome. Somehow it felt foreign to her now, but she was still able to hold the grip and put her finger around the trigger.

Water first.

She let go of the weapon and it slid to the floor. Her hand returned to the backpack, found the water bottle, and retrieved it. There was about an inch of liquid left. She guzzled it greedily, and then felt an intense sense of disappointment at how little it relieved her suffering.

The sickness grew worse. Her eyesight played tricks on her. She could have sworn her mother and father were in the room. They stood a few feet away, watching their two children, helpless to alleviate their distress.

"Mom... Dad..."

Her voice was a mere whisper.

"Mel," her father said. "It's too late for Paul. You need to end his torment."

"Is it too late for me, too?" she asked.

They didn't answer because they were no longer in the room.

"Mom? Dad?"

The tears flowed freely. Where did they go?

"Come back!"

But it was no use. Mel rolled onto her back and stared at the coffee shop's ceiling. It was made of wood and clay, but to her it was a black, night sky full of stars. The moon shone

brightly in one corner.

I know this place.

Colorado. Near Durango.

We used to go camping there.

Her father had a thing for the hip town—it was a lot like Austin—and the family would go on camping trips to a particular spot in the mountains near Durango. Apparently it was where he had proposed to her mother, so it was a special place for both of them. One of Mel's favorite things to do there was to lie on the ground and look at the night sky. Find the star constellations. Wonder at the beauty and awesomeness of the universe. Consider how truly insignificant mankind really was in the grand scheme of things. As her brother grew older, he joined her. Mel thought she came the closest to him on those stargazing nights.

A vivid memory replayed in Mel's head. She was fifteen years old, and little Paul was only eight. They were lying on inflatable mattresses on top of ground cloths that covered some of the softest grass Mel had ever felt. And the night sky was unusually clear. It was *full* of stars.

She remembered her mother calling from the tents. "Mel? Paul? Time to go to bed now. It's late."

"Be there in a minute, Mom!" she hollered.

"We're not going. Not 'til I see a shooting star," Paul muttered. Despite the autism, there were times he could speak clearly and succinctly. Whenever he got something in his head, he was determined to see it through.

"Paul, I can't guarantee we're going to see one. They're rare. It's like finding a four-leaf clover. You're *lucky* if you see one."

"That's why I want to see one."

"Well, we can't stay much longer. You heard Mom."

The siblings were quiet for a moment. Mel traced constellation silhouettes with her eyes and inhaled the wonderful fresh air.

"What's out there, Mel?" Paul asked.

"Huh?"

He pointed to the sky. "Out there. What's out there?"

Mel chuckled, "Silly, I don't know. No one knows, really. A bunch of stars and galaxies and stuff."

"Any people?"

She smiled at his earnestness. "Who knows. I think there's a lot in the universe we don't know about. Shoot, there's a lot about what's on our own *Earth* we don't know about."

He was quiet after that. Mel would have preferred to stay out later, but she knew her mother was primarily concerned about Paul going to sleep at a decent hour. It was already after midnight.

"Come on, Paul, we better go."

"Wait! I want to... hey! *Look!*"

Mel wasn't sure if those were the exact words exchanged between the two of them, but she distinctly remembered the shooting star. It sailed across the sky just as she was about to give up and make her brother go to the tent.

It was spectacular.

"Quick, make a wish, Paul."

"What?"

"It's good luck to wish upon a falling star. You know that song?"

"No."

"Never mind, just make a wish, it might come true."

He was quiet, but by then the heavenly phenomenon had completed its appearance. After a pause, Paul said, "Wow, that was cool."

"I guess it pays to never give up, huh."

"You can say that again."

"I guess it pays to never give up, huh."

He laughed and pushed her arm. She rolled over and started tickling him, causing the boy to howl with laughter.

"Mel? Paul? Get back here this instant!"

Mel, laughing, too, called, "Okay, mom, we're coming." She helped him up and they gathered the mattresses and ground cloths. As they walked back to the campsite, Paul said, "Hey, Mel, you know what I wished?"

"I don't think you're supposed to tell me."

"I don't care. I wished that you'll always be my sister."

"Silly, you didn't have to waste a wish on *that*, I'll always be your sister no matter what!"

"It wasn't wasted."

He said it with conviction. That was when Mel knew he really had a special bond with her little brother. He really did look up to his older sister and depend on her for assistance, and Mel wholeheartedly loved him and had taken part in his care from the beginning. Her mother and father often commented how much they appreciated her willingness to help them handle and accept a child with autism.

"Thank you, Paul. I'll try my best to always be your sister."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

The reminiscence ended there. Mel couldn't recall saying goodnight or climbing into her sleeping bag. She didn't know what they'd done that day or the next. All she remembered was that little exchange with Paul under the stars.

The ceiling, walls, and floor of the deserted coffee shop returned, enclosing Mel and her brother in a box. That's what it felt like, anyway. They were the two lizards she'd caught and put in a shoe box when she was eight years old. Her father had made her let them go. Who was going to let Paul and Mel go?

Christ, we're not frikkin' lizards. I'm losing my mind.

She looked over at the canvas postal bag writhing on the floor next to her. It resembled a giant, flexing thumb, and it was mocking her. It was Paul, though. She still knew that.

What did Mom and Dad say? They told me to do something. Oh. Right. They want me to end Paul's torment.

They hadn't said if she should end hers.

Where was the gun? There, beside her. Sitting on the floor. She had held it earlier and it was heavy. Right. Pick it up.

Oh, my God, I'm turning. I can't hold on to my thoughts.

She raised to a sitting position. The revolver was already in her hand but she didn't remember touching it.

What am I doing? Oh, yeah.

The gigantic wiggling thumb fought even harder when Mel straddled it. She managed to pin it down and hold it. The canvas boasted an outline of a head. Mel pointed the barrel there.

"Forgive me, Paul."

The noise of the gunshot surprised her and she dropped the weapon. Her ears rang and something had blinded her. The light in the room played tricks on her. It was much darker than before, and everything was yellow. She hadn't realized how much time had passed during her "dream" of the camping trip. Outside, the sun was setting.

There was no more struggling inside the mail bag.

She stared at the thing. A red spot on the canvas progressively grew larger. *What's in there?* she wondered. *Those are someone's legs sticking out*.

Then she remembered, shuddered, and started to cry. Mel reached for the body and closely hugged the bundle. She buried her face in the canvas and wept until she didn't know why she was crying.

This is it... I'm turning... I know it...

Mel sat up and focused on the revolver on the floor.

One more bullet.

It was the gun she had used on Paul. There was another round of ammunition in it.

And it's mine.

It was now or never, right?

If you don't even try, then you're worthless.

It was true. She could feel it, the surge of sickness building toward an explosion in her body. She was *turning*.

Without hesitation, Mel picked up the weapon. Her hand shook uncontrollably, but she managed to fold her finger around the trigger, hold the barrel to her head, and fire.

But she didn't fall to the ground. The noise of the discharge was deafening, and all she

could hear was a loud ringing tone in her ears. She felt liquid running down the side of her head. Mel touched it and looked at her hand. Blood. She probed her skull but found no bullet hole—only a nasty cut where the bullet had sheared her skin and shot off into the wall.

She had missed.

Her hand was shaking so much that she hadn't been able to hold the gun steady.

The wail of frustration and defeat she emitted could probably be heard for blocks. Ant then—

—the convulsion was explosive. The athlete's body jerked, as if it had been snapped by an invisible force. The blurry images, the dim light, the pain in her abdomen and head, and the awareness of her surroundings went to black.

26

7:00pm.

Her eyes opened.

The surroundings were unfamiliar. She was in a room with overturned tables and chairs. The light outside the open door was fading. Instinctually, she knew that when the sun was down it was time to hunt. The urge to hunt was strong. Her prey was *out there*.

A form lay on the floor beside her. Two legs sticking out of a bag. Dead legs. She sniffed the appendages and determined that the blood flowing through them was still wet and warm. Pants covered the skin, so she pulled up the cuff to expose a thin calf. She bit into it. The flesh was salty and delicious. Another chomp. The food gave her strength, so she continued to bite away on the skinny leg. Not much meat, but it would do for now.

It took ten minutes for her to devour a melon-sized chunk, all the way to the bone. The tougher tissue beneath the skin was the best part. But now she needed something more substantial.

She stood. Where was she? What place was this?

She didn't care.

Sauntering around the room, she sniffed for signs of life. She found two other dead bodies, but they were already dried up and worthless. Best to go outside. Besides, there was a *sound*...

An unusual noise in the sky. Chopping. *Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack.* Her desire was to go see what it was. She liked sounds.

The sun was very bright, even though it was on its way down. Her eyes burned from the

intense illumination, but it wouldn't be long before nightfall. That's when her vision would be better. How did she know that? She just did.

Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack.

What was that noise?

Looking up, she saw an object flying in the sky. It was an oblong vessel with a straight tail. The wings on top whirled around very fast, rendering them nearly invisible; but she could see them. The blade-like wings were what made the object fly. Some kind of... *machine*. She remembered that word.

At first she felt fear. Was the thing in the sky dangerous? Would it hurt her?

Others of her kind were in the street. They were looking up, too. Many were speaking, telling their friends what they thought the form might be. She couldn't understand what they were saying, though... and yet she did.

Colors and shapes were strange to her. The brightness hurt, but it didn't take long for her eyes to adjust. The others around her smelled familiar to her.

What was this place? How did she get here? She didn't know.

She didn't care.

A feeling in her belly told her that she needed to bite more flesh. Hunger. Thirst. The urge grew. In fact, she had forgotten about the flying object making the *ack-ack-ack* sound. Now all she wanted was more meat.

She considered biting one of the others, but the idea somehow repulsed her. They had *something* beneath their skin that she didn't want to eat. It was better to find prey that didn't have that *something*, whatever it was. She had that *something*, too. It was *fresh* prey she wanted. The meat she had savored in the room a few minutes earlier was not exactly fresh. That

something was in the taste of that meat, but it wasn't very strong. However, it had been a fresher specimen of prey than these others, the ones like her, therefore it had been edible.

At this point she inhaled through her nose and determined that her form was covered in that *something*. The vivid color of blood permeated the garments she wore. Chunks of flesh decorated the shirt, the pants. It was in her hair, too, matting it with the dried sticky matter.

Again, the emotion of fear surged through her senses. It was so strong that she wanted to scream and lash out at her surroundings. She began to vocalize her fright and found herself moving through the others as if she were looking for some kind of relief from the anxiety. Eventually, though, she stopped. Breathing heavily, her eyes darted around uncontrollably.

The others focused attention on her. One of them took her hand. The feeling of fear subsided a bit. She let him pull off the garment covering her skin. There were bite marks on both arms—one was much bigger. The other creature sniffed the large wound and licked it. She let him. She didn't mind. His teeth sank into her flesh. It hurt. She didn't mind. The other bit off a piece of her flesh. She didn't mind.

Then, without warning, she became angry again. She was mad at the other. She didn't like the other. She hit the other and yelled at him. He moved away. Another creature moved toward her and she yelled at him, too. That seemed to keep them at bay. She told them not to mess with her. She would bite *them*, too.

Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack.

The noise attracted her attention again. The chopping shape in the sky hovered in one spot. She thought there might be prey up there, inside the object. Sure enough, heads and arms of prey jutted out of openings in the thing. Oh! Look at that! The shape dropped something. A big square box fell from the bottom of the vessel. A brightly-colored halo suddenly formed over

the box as it fell. When that happened, the box stopped falling and began *floating* down. She and the others watched as the insect's deposit crashed into the side of a building and then slid to the ground with a boom. The halo gently came to rest beside the box, stretched along the road for several feet. She wanted to touch it.

Most of the others had already started walking toward the fallen item. She was curious, too. What was it? Did it have prey inside?

The halo wasn't a halo after all. It was a material similar to the garments on her body. It had stringy veins that connected to the box. She joined the others as they clawed and kicked at the thing. There were colorful symbols on each side, along with many unusual markings. Her mind told her that she had the ability to read the markings, but she couldn't. They meant nothing to her.

She didn't care.

She reached for an edge and tried to pull on it. The box contained a mystery. Maybe it was food. Several others continued to pry at every corner and edge. They managed to push it over on a different side.

Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack.

The flying shape was going away. She looked up and saw it disappear behind a building. The box was a gift. They had to get it open.

The others rotated the object to another side and kept battering the edges. Some of them used their teeth, but the substance was so hard it broke some of them. Many cut their mouths, fingers, and hands on the edges.

Creeeaaaak.

One side of the object made a noise and loosened. She pulled on that part and managed

to widen the gap between it and the rest of the box. Others figured out what she was doing and helped.

At last. A side of the box separated and fell to the ground.

There were no prey inside. The others expressed their anger and frustration at that. Some of them walked away to find prey somewhere else. She was still curious, though. What was in the big box? The straw was of no interest to her. Underneath the straw, though, was an abundance of small, thin items that looked like her fingers, only made of a harder substance. She picked one up and sniffed it. That gave her no clue as to what it was. More markings decorated the outside.

ANTIZIN.

The markings meant nothing to her. She sniffed it again and then snapped it in two with her hands. A clear liquid spilled out. She smelled it and decided it wasn't anything to lick or eat. She dropped the object on the ground.

There was nothing else inside except the little hard fingers. She didn't care.

"Hey! Get away from there!"

What was that?

The others were attracted to the sound. It came from some distance away, but she could see what made the noise.

Prey.

There were several of them. Running toward the box.

The prey kept making noises with sticks they carried. Really *loud* noises. Big *bangs* that echoed in the air around her. One of the others beside her fell to the ground. Something had punctured a hole in his head. Another one of her colleagues dropped. And another.

Bang. Bang.

When some others lumbered toward the prey, they, too, dropped when the cracking sounds continued.

What should she do? An inner voice told her to get away. Don't stay. Wait until after dark to get the prey. It would be easier then.

So she turned and walked away from the big box. The others were fighting with the prey, but she didn't want to fight.

Not yet.

The sky was growing darker. Good.

Wait. Now where was she?

She stood in a different spot than before. The walking had gone on for quite a while but she hadn't paid any attention to where she was going. It didn't make any sense to pay attention. Walking was walking. Moving was moving. The important thing was to find prey. There were many dead bodies on the ground. Some were fresher than others, but they didn't interest her. She wanted *very* fresh prey, like the ones making the banging noises earlier. But an inkling of intelligence told her that the prey making those loud sounds were dangerous. It was best to find prey that didn't make those awful booms.

Something about her new surroundings was familiar. A sign on the grass proclaimed it to be CITY SQUARE but she couldn't read it. There were more others and prey on the ground, but they were all dead. Dead didn't interest her. She didn't care.

Oh, oh, something is after me!

She turned but there was nothing there. That made her angry. She was compelled to yell and express how mad she was.

And yet she was still frightened. The anxiety coursing through her veins had come on suddenly and it made her want to attack the first living thing she saw and kill it. Any living thing was a danger. Why did she feel that way? She didn't know. It was simply very clear that she was scared and that anything around her could be hiding some horrible terror that would hurt her. She howled, but she didn't understand the words that came out of her mouth.

She walked across the park. More bodies. No interest. Somehow she sensed that fresh prey wasn't far away. Her nose led her farther east, toward the darker part of the sky. She knew that she wouldn't feel so anxious once it was completely night. The prey would be more helpless then and she would be much stronger.

Block after block. What was drawing her in that direction? She didn't know. She didn't care.

Eventually she learned what it was. Prey—*real,* fresh prey—were on the other side of a barrier. They appeared to be working on the barrier, building it, making it higher. Who were they? What were they doing? Were they putting *her* in a big box? She tried to go through the barrier, but the wires pricked her skin.

"Hey, look, there's one of them."

"It's a girl!"

"How old do you think she is?"

"Hard to tell. She looks young."

"I think she's American. Look, she's white."

"Could be she was one of the athletes."

"God, it's disgusting. There's blood and shit all over her."

"Hey, you, can you hear me? Hey, girl! Young woman! Are you American?"

"She's sick, man, she can't understand you."

She knew the prey were making gibberish with their mouths and it meant nothing to her. However, she could *feel* that their attention was on her. She yelled at them and beat on the barrier.

"She can't get through, can she?"

"I don't think they have the sense to break through barbed-wire. That'll hold them until we finish building the wall."

"They can't climb the fence?"

"What do you think we have sharpshooters for?"

"Maybe we should put her out of her misery."

"You want me to shoot her, sir?"

"Nah. That's not our job. There are other units in the Ministry that do the dirty work. We're lucky to be in construction."

She continued to yell at them. She wanted to get at them so badly. The smell of their flesh and blood was overpowering. The sound of their heartbeats was deafening. Oh, how she wanted to burrow her teeth into a ribcage and pull out a beating heart. Yum!

"It's getting dark. Quitting time. Let's go."

The prey got inside a big home on the other side of the barrier. It made a rumbling noise and then rolled away. She shouted and cried and screamed for the prey to come back, but they left her alone, trapped behind the barrier. She could go no further. The barrier had sharp teeth that prevented her from climbing it. Best to find prey somewhere else. She didn't care.

By the time she had returned to the wide open space—*the park*—the sun had completely

vanished. It was truly dark now, and she felt more alive than she had earlier. She jumped up and down. Her legs felt restless, so she started to move faster. Odd—she hadn't been able to move as quickly before, but now she could. She ran.

It felt exhilarating to run. It freed her. The anxiety and fear dissipated and she felt more confident. She could do *anything*. It was as if to run was the reason for her existence. With the dying light, she had gained power and will to destroy whatever stood in her way.

Most of all, though, she was hungry.

It was time to start hunting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raymond Benson is the author of over thirty books and previously penned THE BLACK STILETTO (2011), THE BLACK STILETTO: BLACK & WHITE (2012), THE BLACK STILETTO: STARS & STRIPES (2013), THE BLACK STILETTO: SECRETS & LIES (2014), and THE BLACK STILETTO: ENDINGS & BEGINNINGS (2014).

Between 1996 and 2002, he was commissioned by the James Bond literary copyright holders to take over writing the 007 novels. In total he penned and published worldwide six original 007 novels, three film novelizations, and three short stories. An anthology of his 007 work, THE UNION TRILOGY, was published in the fall of 2008, and a second anthology, CHOICE OF WEAPONS, appeared summer 2010. The six original titles are now available for Kindle. His book THE JAMES BOND BEDSIDE COMPANION, an encyclopedic work on the 007 phenomenon, was first published in 1984 and was nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe Award by Mystery Writers of America for Best Biographical/Critical Work.

Raymond recently co-edited with Jeffery Deaver the anthology ICE COLD—TALES OF INTRIGUE FROM THE COLD WAR. Using the pseudonym "David Michaels," Raymond is also the author of the *NY Times* best-selling books TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL and its sequel TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL—OPERATION BARRACUDA. Raymond's original suspense novels include EVIL HOURS, FACE BLIND, SWEETIE'S DIAMONDS (which won the Readers' Choice Award for Best Thriller of 2006 at the *Love is Murder Conference for Authors, Readers and Publishers*), TORMENT, and ARTIFACT OF EVIL. A HARD DAY'S DEATH, the first in a series of "rock 'n' roll thrillers," was published in 2008, and its sequel, the Shamus Award-nominated DARK SIDE OF THE MORGUE, published in

2009. Other recent works include novelizations of the popular videogames, METAL GEAR SOLID and its sequel, METAL GEAR SOLID 2—SONS OF LIBERTY, HOMEFRONT—THE VOICE OF FREEDOM, co-written with John Milius, and HITMAN: DAMNATION.

The author has taught courses in film genres and history at New York's New School for Social Research, Harper College in Palatine, Illinois, College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and currently presents Film Studies lectures with *Daily Herald* movie critic Dann Gire. Raymond has been honored in Naoshima, Japan, with the erection of a permanent museum dedicated to one of his novels, and he is also an Ambassador for Japan's Kagawa Prefecture. Raymond is an active member of International Thriller Writers Inc., Mystery Writers of America, the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers, a full member of ASCAP, and served on the Board of Directors of The Ian Fleming Foundation for sixteen years. He is based in the Chicago area.

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